THRILLING
WESTERN
10¢
AUG.
BIG BEND BUCKAROOS
A Complete Action Novel
By WILTON WEST
MOUNTAIN WADDY
By CLAUDE RISTER
GRANT TAYLOR
CLIFF WALTERS
SYL MacDOWELL

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holder for the
inside front cover.

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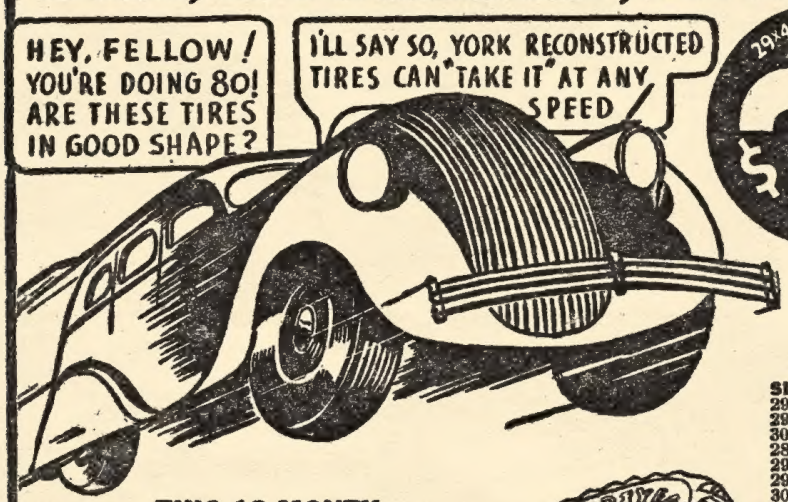

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THRILLING WESTERN

Vol. VI, No. 2 G. B. FARNUM, *Editor* August, 1935

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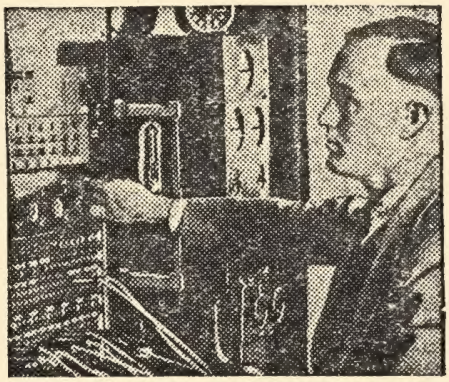

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IN THE AIR:

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Get into Aviation now—when you are still getting in on the ground floor of a new industry—when you have a chance to forge ahead without having to displace lots of older men. Aviation is a young man's industry, where young men earn real money. The President of the biggest air line in the World is only 35 years old. Most famous pilots are in their early thirties, or even younger. It is a young man's industry, which means that there are plenty of opportunities to forge ahead. But just because it is run by young men, don't get the idea that Aviation is a small business. Millions are being spent yearly to develop and improve airways and planes. Thousands of men earn good livings from the business. And many, many thousands will enter it in the future. It is a great and growing industry, this Aviation, an industry that still brings romance, excitement, thrills—even while it is bringing big opportunities and good pay.

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Walter Hinton, Pres.
Aviation Institute
Washington, D. C.

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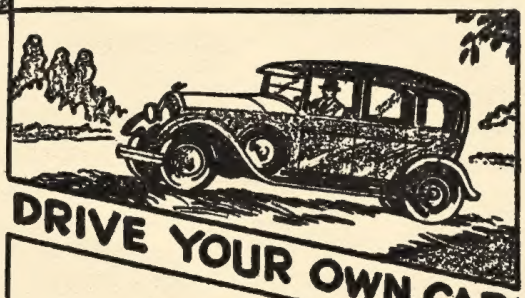

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CITY..... STATE.....

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NO LIMIT TO MY OFFER

If you are honest, conscientious, and willing to listen to reason, I won't put any limit on your earnings. You will have a steady business day in and day out. No danger of lay-offs—no chance of getting fired. I really start you in your own business and it doesn't cost you one cent—there is no stock to carry—no expensive fixtures to buy—no store rent to pay. That's the kind of opportunity I am offering you.

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Others are making big money with my plans—why not you? If you have been working only part time, or for small wages, now this is your opportunity to get cash immediately—to live well and do the things you've been wanting to do—to enjoy life to the fullest. Here's what some have already done: Howard B. Ziegler, Pa., made as much as $21.60 in a single day and $103.32 in a single week. Albert Becker, Mich., made $40.00 in a day and as high as $100.00 in a week. Ray Chapman, Mo., made $73.50 in a week. Mrs. C. R. Luoma, W. Va., averaged $40.00 a week for a year. Chester Clay, N. Mex., made $10.00 in just two hours. These exceptional earnings show the amazing possibilities of my offer. Hundreds of other Route Operators have sent me similar glowing and enthusiastic reports. Don't let this opportunity pass—send me your name today—Now!

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I don't need your money—I need your help. Rush me your name so I can lay all the facts before you and then you can decide for yourself. You don't need experience and you don't have to take a long, tedious training course. You take no risk. I furnish everything. I even give Brand New 8-Cylinder Ford Tudor Sedans to producers as an extra bonus. Costs nothing to investigate. Send me your name on coupon or penny postcard. Do it today—right now!

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"Only 6½ months ago I started with your company without a penny to my name, and today (I just finished my balance) I am worth a little more than $1200.00 I can hardly believe it possible—such success in so short a time. Hans Coordes, Nebr."

MADE $79.00 IN ONE WEEK

"I just received word that the brand new Ford Car is mine. I certainly thank you very much for presenting me with this wonderful gift in addition to the steady cash profits which I have been receiving regularly. I cleared as high as $23.00 for one day's work, and earned as much as $79.00 in a single week.

"Lambert Wilson, Mich."

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I have some unusually good openings for women. Light, pleasant business pays up to $9.50 a day full time and as high as $5.00 a day spare time. Mrs. Carrie McCalmant, Nebr., reported that she has never let her earnings run below $50.00 a week. Mrs. Jewel Hackett, here in Ohio, made $33.00 in seven hours. Earnings such as these are evidence of the tremendous possibilities of my offer to women.

FOOD ROUTE COUPON

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Without cost or any obligation on my part, send me the facts showing how I can get started at once making up to $60.00 a week.

Name.....

Address.....

.....

(Please Print or Write Plainly)

The SWAP COUNTER

An Exchange Service for Readers

HERE'S where you can exchange something you have but don't want for something someone else has that you do want. This is a FREE service.

For example, if you have a camera and don't use it, and would like to have a stamp album, write: "Have Eastman camera, No. 1, Jr., make, 3 years old, good condition, will exchange for stamp album with 3,000 stamps, 25 countries—John Smith, 49 Park Street, Albany, N. Y."

Limit your request to 25 words. No goods for sale listed, nor requests concerning firearms or any illegal articles.

Type or hand-print clearly, in submitting announcements. THRILLING WESTERN will not be responsible for losses sustained. Make very plain just what you have and what you want to "swap" it for. Enclose a clipping of this announcement with your request.

Have book of instructions for collecting and preserving valuable lepidoptera, by James Sinclair. Also have assortment of boys books, a new closed end tailpiece for guitar. What have you? Ralph E. Cox, 225 West 2nd Street, Holton, Kansas.

Want waterfront scenes, photos of tugboats, fishing boats, paintings of ships and other sea pictures. Have large lists to trade. Fred P. Boje, 517 3rd Street, N. E., Auburn, Washington.

Want printing press outfit. Have laboratory chemical set, 27 pieces, slide rule, National Success Course, generator for charging batteries. Albert Lee Oden, Jr., Bankston, Ala.

Two Zenith projectors, complete outfit. Want peanut and gum ball vendors. H. M. Pedrick, Station D, Danville, Ill.

Have two-gallon fire extinguisher and one quart Fyrfighter. Want ¼ horsepower single phase motor. John F. Johnson, 531 E. Walnut Lane, Philadelphia, Pa.

Have two typewriters. Want good printing press and font, radio or mimeograph. Short wave radio for key stamping outfit. B. N. Crawford, R. R. 1, Winchester, Ky.

Have 1933 1500 egg electric cabinet incubator. Trade for printing press, multigraph, or what have you? G. T. Harrison, R. 3, Provo, Utah.

Book set by Scott, office pencil sharpener, full radio course, 5 tube Stromberg-Carlson battery, portable victrola, fencing foil. Trade all or part. Robert Greene, 349 Knickerbocker Avenue, Brooklyn, N. Y.

Will exchange cowboy hat, wide brim and high crown, size 7, for guitar, short wave radio, or typewriter. Murray Cohen, 757 East 179th Street, Bronx, N. Y.

Have books, magazines, cameras, phonograph records, mail order secrets, for typewriter, or what have you? Fay Schjuster, Box 61, Greenfield Park, N. Y.

Have stories to swap for typewriter. Joe Cullum, Portageville, Mo.

Have hand made silk pillows, 17 x 26. Want motorcycle or jig saw. W. Loeser, 305 E. 84th St., N. Y. C.

Have naval covers to trade. Send list for mine. Fred Wayman, 286 Pike Street, Carbondale, Pa.

Have U. S. and foreign stamps, precancels, seeds. Will exchange for small cactus plants, seeds, stamps, coins, or? Joseph Knapp, 190 Judson Avenue, Bridgeport, Conn.

Have 6 tube radiola battery set, pictures. Want artist paints, old typewriter, or? F. J. Birch. R. R. No. 2. Leamington, Ontario, Canada.

Have cornet and case, also instruction book, to swap for drums and sax. M. Bannon, 105 Third Place, Brooklyn, New York.

Will swap small camera, set of boxing gloves, fountain pen and pencil, for books, stamps, photos of baseball players, or what have you? Howard Vinton, Wood Street, Halifax, Mass.

Have multigraph to swap for printing press outfit. Armand Dupuis, 3 Cypress Street, Ludlow, Mass.

Will trade 100 precancels for 50 commemoratives. E. Judd, 661 Platt Street, Toledo, Ohio.

Have magazines, coins, series books and radio microphone. Want telescope or stamps. H. Davidoff, 1451 East 4th Street, Brooklyn, N. Y.

Will swap 146 acre farm and buildings, also village meat and grocery store for grain, live stock, or what have you? A. Lundling, Box 172, Grassflat, Pa.

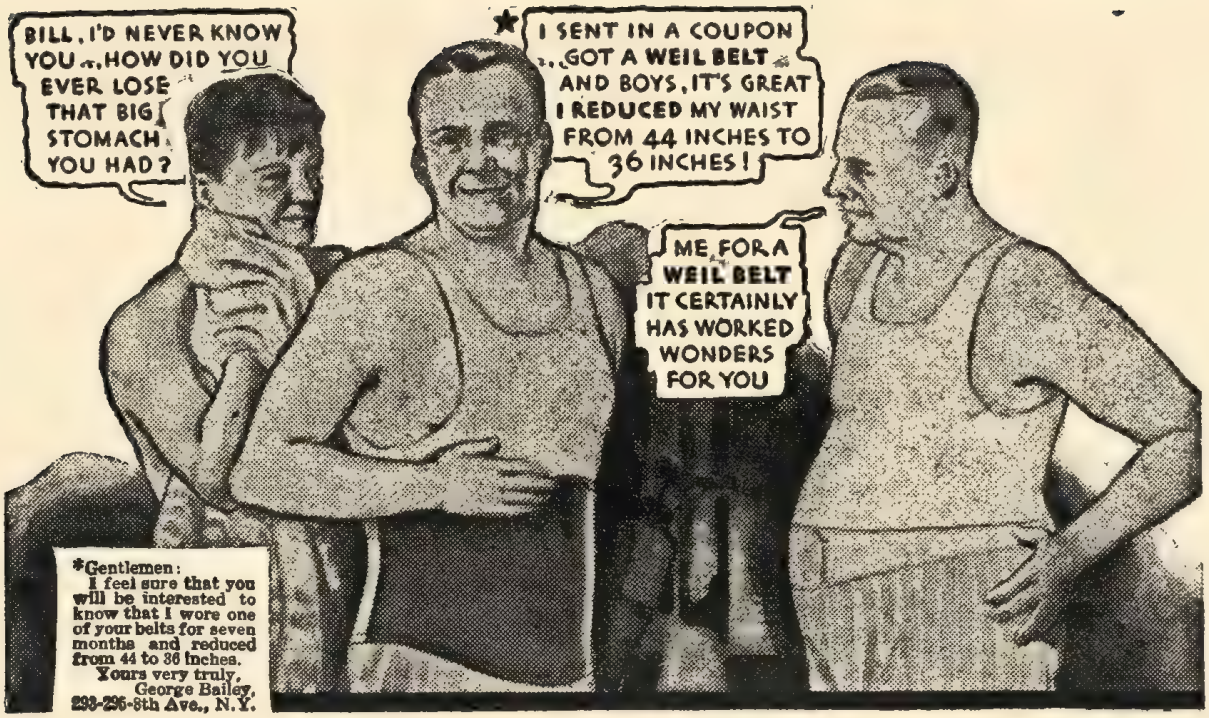
Will swap one or more complete Gillette razors for formulas, printed stationery, or what have you? R. P. Caveney, 5 Loop Street, Cortland, N. Y.

I have 138 periodicals of all kinds. Will trade for radio "A" eliminator. J. D. Williams, Jr., 7450 Rogers Avenue, Chicago, Ill.

Have postcard projector, telephone mike, new 233-39 tubes, booster magneto. Want air compressor, short wave set, typewriter, or? Thomas Hanners, 4224 Park Blvd., Louisville, Ky.

Have radio servicing course and radio parts. Will swap for drafting course, or equipment, or what have you? C. Sweigart, 280 Duke Street, Ephrata, Pa.

Have taxidermy course to swap for fishing tackle, or what have you? Elias Hartranft, R. D. 4, Easton, Pa.



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...or it won't cost you a penny!

YOU will appear much slimmer at once, and in 10 short days your waistline will actually be 3 inches smaller... three inches of fat gone... or it won't cost you one cent.

■ For 12 years the Weil Belt has been accepted as ideal for reducing by men in all walks of life ...from business men and office workers who find that it removes cumbersome fat with every movement... to active outdoor men who like the feeling of protection it gives.

IT IS THE MASSAGE-LIKE ACTION THAT DOES IT!

Now there is an easy way to reduce without exercise, diet or drugs. The Weil Health Belt exerts a massage-like action that removes fat with every move you make.

It supports the sagging muscles of the abdomen and quickly gives you an erect, athletic carriage. Many enthusiastic wearers write that it not only reduces fat but it also supports the abdominal walls and keeps the digestive organs in place... that they are no longer fatigued...and that it greatly increases their endurance. You will be more than delighted with the great improvement in your appearance.

DON'T WAIT... FAT IS DANGEROUS!

Fat is not only unbecoming, but it also endangers your health. Insurance companies know the danger of fat accummulations. The best medical authorities warn against obesity, so don't wait any longer.

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"DOUBLE-QUICK" REDUCTION *during the* SUMMERTIME

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A Complete Novel

A rifle muzzle appeared,

Big Bend

CHAPTER I

Bushwhackers

BUCK BONNER, riding south from Marfa, wiped the heavy desert dust from his perspiring young face with the ends of his polka-dot neckerchief. With keen grey eyes set in a face of bronze, he studied the Texas Big Bend country.

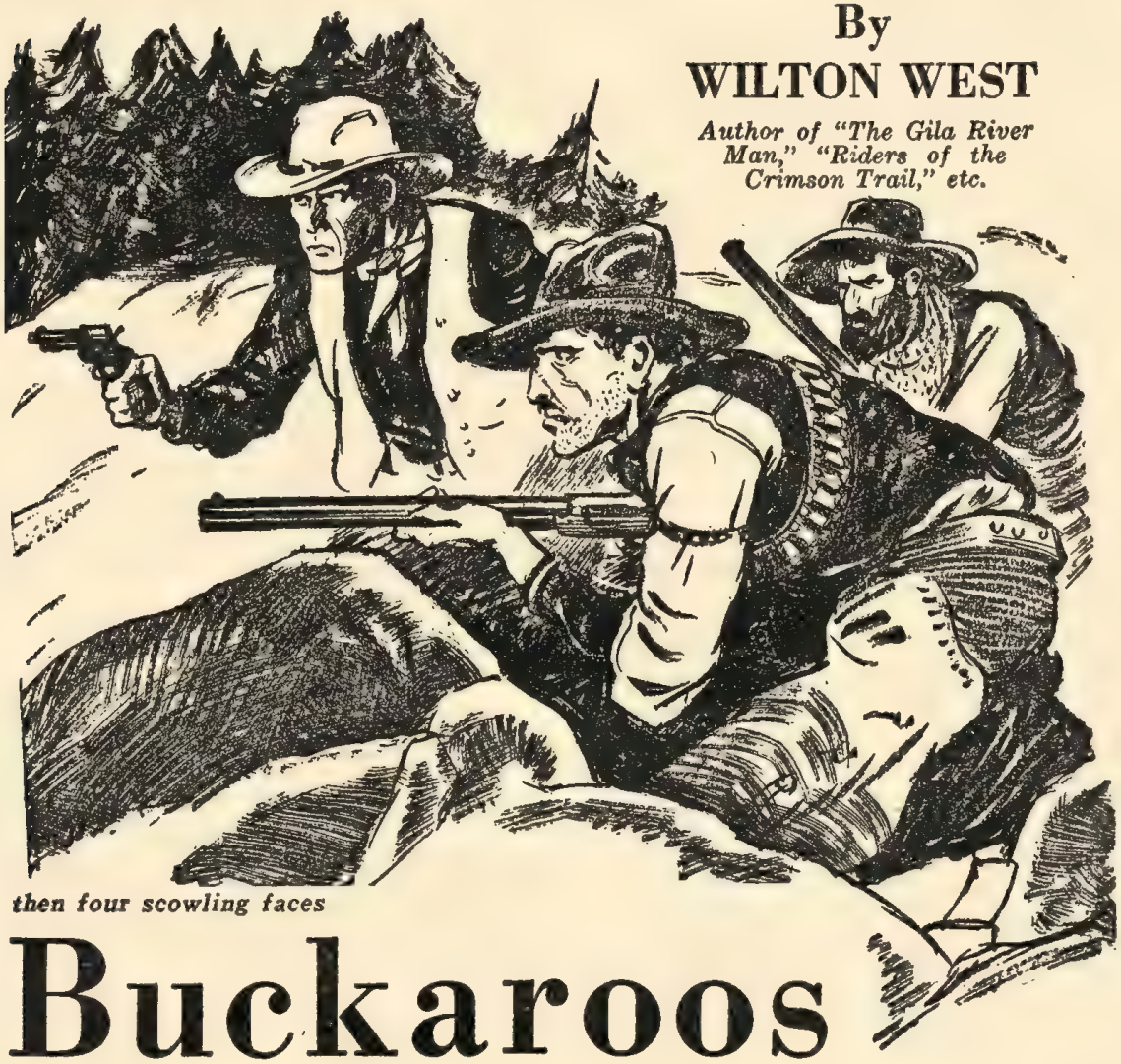
Parched, rugged, a maze of twisting, rock-strewn hills and wideflung valleys, it lay stark under the blazing sun of noon.

"They shore named this ol' cow country plumb right, Blaze," he said to his handsome pinto. "Hell's Million Acres!"

As he saw some old ruins ahead, he pulled his two big .45s slightly forward on his lean hips, and his eyes narrowed. His tall, wide-shouldered form straightened in his Myers

Makes Guns Talk Turkey to Ornery Buzzards!

By
WILTON WEST
Author of "The Gila River Man," "Riders of the Crimson Trail," etc.



then four scowling faces

Buckaroos

saddle, and his square jaw hardened a bit.

"Reckon them's th' Alamitos ranch buildings Jim wrote us tuh head for, an' he said tuh watch our step; that them Mort Ringer outlaws sometimes hangs out round these parts."

For four hot days, he had been riding eastward from New Mexico, to reply in person to old Jim Holt's letter asking him to come. Now he was thirty miles south of Marfa, the little railroad town, and in the very heart of outlaw country.

"Come a-runnin', Buck," Jim Holt's letter had said, "and tie down yore holsters. They's hell to pay, and I'm needin' you."

As he approached the old abandoned ranch, he studied it curiously, riding slowly now. The adobe buildings were in the last stages of decay, the corral fences half down. A haunt for coyotes. Tall cottonwoods

as He Swaps Lead with Renegade Rustlers!

Buck Bonner

surrounded it. Abysmal silence lay over the place.

"Yeah, Blaze," Buck muttered, blinking against the sun's glare on hot sands, "it's shore one hell-uv-a—"

"Hold it, fella!"

The curt, harsh voice from behind a mass of boulders sounded close, and there came the sharp snap of the mechanism of a Winchester. Buck halted. Over the top of the boulders appeared a rifle muzzle. Then three big hats appeared above unshaven, scowling faces. One man had red hair.

"Git down!" the man called gruffly.

BUCK'S eyes narrowed. He stepped down from his saddle, stood calmly rolling a cigarette, one hand remaining on his reins.

"Well, boys," he asked quietly, "an' now what?"

The three men stalked forth from behind the boulders, one behind the other. The leader, huge, red-haired, held a rifle pointing straight at him, and the other two men had their six-guns out.

"We're needin' yore bronc, fella," the red-haired man stated gruffly. "Git walkin' back tuh town. We got business somewheres else." His rifle muzzle poked against Buck's ribs. "Hustle along, stranger, an' don't look back. Keep goin' an' yuh'll live longer."

With the three surly ruffians facing him and their guns held ready to spurt red death, Buck had no choice. But he grinned.

"O. K. with me, boys," he said amusedly. He passed the cigarette paper across the end of his tongue, gave the smoke an expert twirl and poked it between his lips. "Yuh're gittin' a nice, gentle hoss, fellas."

That he was facing a trio of killers, he had no doubt. But his eyes held twinkles as he walked away, with a parting glance at his pinto. He had trained Blaze himself, a top-hand cow-horse, and had taught him many tricks to be done at certain signals. Fifty yards away, he stopped and looked back. The three men were watching him grimly, guns ready.

"Take good care o' my hoss, boys," he called back, grinning. "He's a right smart bronc, for a young pinto."

His tone was almost jocular, but its humor failed to register. The three men scowled harder and fingered their guns.

"Keep goin', *hombre!*" the red-haired man growled, moving his Winchester slightly forward against his hip.

Buck smiled, waved a hand.

"*Bueno,* mister," he called back. "Just thought I'd like seein' yuh romp away on 'im. I sorta like that bronc a heap."

"Damn it, git movin'!" another of the men roared. Shoving his six-gun forward, he fired close to Buck's high-heeled boots.

Buck laughed softly then. "'Sta

bueno, amigo mio," he replied. Turning, he strode up a low ridge over which the trail to town went and started down its far side.

But he did not go far. Once out of the men's sight, he darted along the side of the ridge for fifty yards, then crawled back to the top, keeping behind boulders and brush. Then laying his Stetson beside him, peered forward. The three men had separated. Two were going over another low ridge behind them. The red-haired man was starting to mount Blaze.

Buck drew out one six-gun and quietly drew back its hammer. He was smiling broadly. Two quick shots and a certain yell, and Blaze would become a pitching, squealing, sun-fishing demon—a thousand pounds of horse dynamite.

But, as Buck slowly lifted his gun, he stopped, tense and staring, for a girl's scream rang out from beyond the ridge over which the other two men had disappeared.

The red-haired man swung up into Blaze's saddle and jerked the pinto around towards the ridge beyond which the scream had sounded. His rowels shot home. Then Buck fired in the air, twice, and gave a peculiar yell. Instantly, Blaze became a widely pitching, squealing outlaw horse, his head down between his forelegs, and sun-fishing at every buck.

CAUGHT unawares, the red-haired man shot into the air, turned a somersault and struck the ground jarringly. But he was on his feet in a split second, gun out, and fired rapidly at Buck's position. Bullets whined close above Buck's head. And then Buck's gun replied. The red-headed man lurched drunkenly, crumpled down in a heap.

For a long five seconds, Buck lay still, watching. But the man on the ground made no move. Again came

Mort Ringer

that wild scream from beyond the other ridge. Leaping down his ridge, Buck darted beside the man on the ground, took one look and knew that Red-head would rob no more men of their horses.

He sprang beside Blaze, swung up into the saddle, and tore up the other ridge at a run. There, he jerked to a sliding halt, and his gun rose, but he saw that he dared not fire.

Down at the foot of the ridge, fifty yards away, the other two men were mounted now, and one of them was holding a struggling, golden-haired girl against his body. Both men went streaking away at top speed, heading for a canyon two hundred yards away. The saddled horse of the dead man was wandering nearby, reins dragging.

The girl, looking over her captor's shoulder at Buck, cried out again.

Her captor struck her heavily across her face. Buck saw the girl's head snap back under the vicious blow. Instantly, he sent his rowels

hard against Blaze's flanks. In gigantic plunges, the pinto went down the steep side of the hill, reached the flat, and bellied out at a run.

Ahead, the man holding the girl suddenly shoved her away. She fell heavily to the ground. The man whipped out a gun, turned in his saddle and ripped out two shots at Buck. But, as the whine of the bullets passed his ears, Buck's gun blazed again and the rider catapulted headlong. The third man, bending low over his saddle, went tearing away into the canyon and vanished.

Buck raced to the girl, leaped to the ground, holstered his gun. She had risen and was standing straight, watching him from glowing blue eyes.

BUCK'S eyes were filled with admiration, for she was lovely—dressed in a white Stetson, light-blue shirtwaist, riding breeches, and high-heeled boots under soft grey chaps.

He judged her to be about twenty. Across her cheeks lay a red welt from the blow she had received. Buck's eyes flashed as he saw it.

"That *hombre* won't never hit another girl, miss," he said grimly. "Glad I happened along. But—how come?"

She smiled at him gloriously as she brushed back a truant wave of hair.

"Mister," she said, "you sure gave those *hombres* what was coming to them—and then some. They were trying to kidnap me, and wanted your horse. Mine ran away when they roped me here."

"But—but why, miss?" Buck asked amazed.

The girl smiled, and her blue eyes hardened slightly.

"You'd savvy if you lived down here, stranger. Those men were part of Mort Ringer's gang, and I'm Jessie McCoy, Jake McCoy's daughter, of the Star-M spread about six miles south of here, along Alamitos Creek. Last month Dad and our boys had a fight with the gang—all rustlers—and Dad killed Ringer's side-kick. Since then, they've been on the prod against our Star-M, vowing they'll wipe us all out. They caught me here as I was riding to town, roped me, and meant to take me into the mountains and hold me for ransom."

"But how come yuh were ridin' round here alone? Jim Holt wrote me them outlaws was hangin' out round these old Alamitos ruins, at times." He studied her keenly. "Most girls would 'a' fainted, goin' through what yuh've jest done."

She laughed softly. "McCoys don't faint, stranger," she replied. "But you mentioned our foreman, Jim Holt. You must be Buck Bonner, whom he's expecting. He couldn't ride up today, so I came—to meet you and guide you to the Star-M. The gang hasn't been seen around these old ruins for some time now, and before they came I loved riding up here. This old Alamitos ranch has always attracted me, with its history of the old Indian days." She eyed him gratefully. "But you sure arrived just when I was needing you, Mr. Bonner."

"Buck—to my friends, Miss Jessie," Buck grinned.

Jessie laughed quietly and her blue eyes sparkled.

"Then 'Buck' it shall be, from now on," she said. "Any pal of Jim Holt's needs no further recommendation. He likes you."

Buck glanced around at the hills and his eyes narrowed.

"Reckon we better be ridin' for th' Star-M," he said. "Mebbe more o' them outlaws round here." He drew out one of his guns and handed it to her. "Take this," he added, "while I rope yuh one o' them two loose hosses."

Swinging up into his saddle on Blaze, he loped towards the two rider-

less horses that were grazing near the mouth of the canyon into which that third man had disappeared. Swinging out his rope, he approached one of the horses and started whirling the loop for a cast. But the two horses flung up their heads and dashed into the canyon. Racing after them, rope ready, Buck made his throw and caught one, jerking the animal to a standstill.

He turned to lead the saddled animal back, and a shot crashed out from the crags above. A slug tore through his shirt at the waist, stinging his flesh. Instantly, Buck flung himself from his saddle and rolled behind a mass of mesquite bushes, jerking out his gun as he rolled. Sprawled out on his stomach, he parted the brush and peered ahead. For a long half minute not a sound came, not a face appeared. The hidden ambusher was wary.

Finally, a man's head appeared up among the crags. Buck lay still, but glanced around at where he had left Jessie McCoy.

She was kneeling behind a mass of boulders, fifty yards away, gripping his six-gun and watching tensely. Between her and Buck, the two horses—his pinto and the one he had roped—were moving slowly towards her. The loop of Buck's rope was still around the outlaw's horse's neck, the other end of the rope tied to Blaze's saddle horn. Buck grinned.

"Hold 'im, Blaze," he called softly. "We'll be needin' yuh both, right *pronto*."

He whistled softly. The pinto stopped.

The outlaw on the hillside stepped into view, searching with his eyes for Buck's position, and gripping a rifle. Suddenly he saw Buck and his rifle leaped to his shoulder. Buck rolled aside as the man's rifle roared. And then came the crack of a six-gun from Jessie McCoy's position.

They rode in grim silence. "Cain't blame 'em," Buck thought

The man on the hill toppled forward, and the rifle clattered down, followed by the outlaw's form tumbling heels over head down the rocky slope.

"Guess yuh got 'im, Miss Jessie," Buck called. "Stay where yuh are an' I'll take a squint."

Buck reached the outlaw's side; but the man was dead, his head crushed by the rocks. He then picked up the man's rifle and strode back to Jessie. Her face was pale, though she tried to smile as he came up.

"I—I—never killed—before!" she gasped. "It—it's horrible—" She held out his gun. "Here, take it, Buck—and take me home—" She swayed against him, and Buck's arm went about her waist, holding her close against his side. Gently, he took the gun from her hand and shoved it home into his holster.

"*You* didn't kill 'im Miss Jessie," he told her. "Only busted his leg. It was the fall that did fer him. Yuh done fine."

He helped her into her saddle, then vaulted to his own.

Side by side they rode away for the Star-M.

"And now those outlaws will be after us harder than ever," she told him anxiously. "That red-headed man you killed was Ringer's right-hand man. Red Mullin, they called him. A wanted killer with a price on his head."

"Well, we've got three less to fight," Buck said. "And yuh've been —wonderful."

She smiled wanly, though the color was coming back into her face.

"It's been *you* who've been wonderful, Buck," she said. "If you hadn't come—"

"But, thank God, I *did*," he said quietly. "But we better ride. No tellin' how many more o' them *hombres* is back there, and when they finds them bodies—"

They broke into a gallop. A mile farther on, Jessie's horse suddenly lost its left front shoe, but as it did not limp, they rode on.

JESSIE McCOY sat her saddle with the ease of an expert, and Buck's eyes glowed as he watched her. Something wonderful leaped into life in his heart. Jim Holt had written nothing about old Jake McCoy's having a daughter.

Once, as their glances met, Jessie's cheeks flushed, and a wave of security swept her. This man beside her, so tall, so strong, so smiling, was all that Jim Holt had told her—and more.

"Han'some as a man has a right tuh be, Miss Jessie," Jim Holt had said, "an' th' fightin'est *hombre* no'th o' th' Rio Grande, bar none. Square as a die, an' never quits a friend."

Miles slipped behind them rapidly and, an hour later, they rode up a red sandstone butte, over which their trail lay, and halted on its top.

Beyond, the view was glorious: Wide sweeping rangeland, dotted with cattle. A herd of horses galloping away, led by a superb black stallion with flowing mane and tail. The Alamitos Creek meandering through the center of the wide valley like a streak of blue, shimmering under the sunlight, its banks lined with tall cottonwoods. Here and there other sandstone buttes, like turretted castles.

Southward were the pinnacled peaks of Mexican mountains hazed by distance.

BUT it was not the scenery that held them. Instead, it was the rattling of gunfire far ahead. Jessie jerked erect in her saddle, cried out in a voice suddenly quivering with anxiety.

"They're attacking our ranch again!" she gasped. "The Star-M lies just beyond those hills ahead of us. And Dad's down there alone! Our men are all out on the range, with Jim Holt, rounding up a shipping herd—"

Their horses leaped at full speed. A mile ahead stood a long, rugged line of hills, through which a pass ran—and beyond lay the Star-M. The rattle of firearms became plainer. Buck's hands flashed over his guns, made sure they were loaded, and his mouth set in a hard line across his bronzed face.

Beside him, boot to boot, Jessie raced with flying reins.

"We'll see the ranch when we get through the pass," she cried to him above the thunder of hoofs. "It lies just beyond."

Buck made no reply, merely nodded; but he was not thinking of the fighting that might lie ahead. His eyes sought landscape for a place in which to leave Jessie McCoy.

CHAPTER II

Trouble at the Star-M

DASHING into the pass a few moments later, Buck jerked to a halt and gripped Jessie's reins, bringing her horse down to a sliding halt beside his own. Near them was a small ravine.

"You gotta stay here, Miss Jessie," he said firmly. "I'll go ahead and see what's happenin'. Get intuh this here ravine an' wait. Keep outa sight, complete." He handed her the rifle.

"But—but Dad may be—"

"Yeah," Buck interrupted swiftly, "but we ain't takin' no chances o' them outlaws gittin' *you* again."

Before she could protest further, he led her horse into the ravine and stopped among some high bushes which hid her and her horse from the trail.

"Stay here, *please*. I'll take a look-see and come back for yuh soon's I kin."

Whirling Blaze, he got back to the pass and raced on. Two hundred yards brought him to the south end of the pass. There he halted, peering out.

A quarter of a mile away, across open rangeland, the Star-M ranch appeared—a group of adobe buildings and corrals, built against rugged foothills.

The firing had ceased. Not a soul was in sight. A herd of cattle, some distance beyond the corrals, was standing with lifted heads, instead of grazing as usual; and, in one corral, Buck could see horses running about excitedly.

"Bet there's been hell tuh pay," Buck muttered as he started across the desert.

A premonition of tragedy leaped into his mind, and his eyes narrowed thinly.

"If they've killed her father, Jim Holt and me'll git every last one of 'em, if it takes th' rest of our lives!"

Flinging from the saddle before the long, rambling adobe ranchhouse, he dashed up on the wide porch. There wasn't a sound. Leaping to the door, he flung it open and stepped inside. And then a hoarse gasp broke from him as he saw what was inside.

Two forms were sprawled on the floor near an upturned table—two forms almost side by side, dead hands holding revolvers, and empty cartridge shells all about. One was Jim Holt. The other, Buck guessed, was old Jake McCoy, owner of the ranch and cattle king of the Big Bend country.

Buck went outside to the 'dobe bunkhouse, his thoughts in a turmoil. He looked around. The place seemed in good order, and it was plain that no fighting had occurred in it. He retraced his steps to where the two bodies lay.

And now he saw how fierce the attack on the ranch had been. Bullets had smashed out most of the window glass, had driven a dozen or more holes through the front door, had smashed part of the keys from the piano, had driven into the walls, into bookcases. A holocaust of lead must have blazed into the room from outside.

"Jim an' old McCoy never had a dog's chance in here," Buck was certain.

Suddenly, pounding hoofs sounded outside. He leaped to the door, jerking out both his guns. A group of some ten cowboys had ridden up to the bunkhouse and were unsaddling, laughing joyously. Star-M riders. Buck strode out on the porch, his guns still in his hands.

"Boys!" he called hoarsely. "Somebody's done killed McCoy and Jim Holt."

The men whirled from their horses,

staring in amazement, then came running forward in a group. They clattered up on the porch, strode inside, stood beside the bodies, their dust-covered faces stern and their eyes hard. One man, kneeling beside the bodies, looked up at the others.

"Plugged in a dozen places, each of 'em!" he announced. Then he rose and looked at Buck from stern eyes. "An' who are *you*, fella?" he asked harshly. "An' how come yuh got both yore guns out?"

"Why, I'm Buck Bonner, from New Mexico," Buck explained, reading the suspicion in the men's eyes. "Jim Holt wrote me tuh come over here, tuh help 'im agin' them Ringer outlaws." He told them briefly of his run-in with the outlaws and his meeting with McCoy's daughter.

"Left Miss Jessie up the pass, huh? Well, we're ridin' up there *pronto*." Buck was made to give up his guns. His hands were bound behind him and he was led northward for the pass. They rode in a grim silence which Buck realized was dangerous. Their eyes showed cold suspicion.

"Cain't blame 'em," Buck thought. "None of 'em knows me personal. But Miss Jessie'll set things right, minute we reach her."

When they rode into the pass he was unbound and led them into the small ravine where he had left Jessie. She was gone! Not a sign of her or of her horse was there.

"So yuh left her here, huh?" the leader of the Star-M cowboys said grimly as he faced Buck. Suddenly his gun muzzle was against Buck's ribs. "Well, mister, we're holdin' yuh fer murder! Tony, ride up tuh Marfa an' bring Sheriff Hale down yere, an' bust th' wind both ways." He glowered at Buck again. "We'd oughta string yuh up higher'n hell, fella," he said, "but we'll give yuh a chancet tuh prove whether yuh're lyin' or not. Jim war expectin' Buck Bonner, what none of us yere knows, an' ef yuh're him, why—we'll be takin' yore word." To the men he said: "I'll take this fella back tuh th' ranch, boys, an' hold 'im 'til Hale gits down. Rest 'o yuh git on yore broncs an' try tuh find Miss Jessie."

The men spread out to cover all the country they could. The big man made Buck get back on Blaze, then mounted his own horse.

"Head back tuh th' Star-M, fella, an' don't try nuthin'."

BUCK'S mind worked rapidly. Some way, he must get free and away, to follow Jessie McCoy's trail. What had become of her was a mystery, and a dread one. Perhaps, after he had ridden to the Star-M, the Ringer gang had passed that little ravine and seen her, caught her, and were now taking her into the hills. A plan suddenly leaped into his mind. He had taught Blaze many tricks. Using two shots and a yell to make him pitch, was only one way.

He drew out his sack of Bull from his shirt pocket, rolled a fresh smoke, lit the cigarette. Lowering the lighted end of the cigarette until it touched Blaze's withers just in front of the saddle, Buck pressed down the burned end against the hair and gave a low, swift hiss. Like a tensely-wired bunch of springs, Blaze shot into the air, whirled, squealed, and drove his head down between his forelegs.

Buck ripped out that signal yell and sent the pitching horse against his captor's. The man was sitting wide-eyed, staring, the gun hanging loosely from one hand. As the two animals met, side by side, Buck suddenly leaned down, as though losing his seat. His left hand darted under the other rider's foot and jerked upward with tremendous power. Tilted out of his saddle, the big man toppled headlong to the ground.

Meanwhile, Buck flung from his

Buck's gun roared twice and the bearded man fell headlong.

own saddle, across that of the other horse, and crashed down on top of the man on the ground. A split-second, and, with a violent twist Buck had the man's gun. He leaped up and stood over the Star-M puncher.

"Unbuckle yore belt, fella!" he ordered, leaning down and jerking away the man's other gun. "I'll be needin' 'em both. He eyed the scowling cowboy amusedly as the fellow passed him the belt. "Reckon I better let yuh do some walkin', too, mister. Yuh ain't got far tuh go, an' I ain't wantin' no trailers after me now."

Stepping beside the man's horse, Buck drew out his big pocket-knife and cut the reins in two, then did the same thing to the latigo straps. He struck the horse sharply with his hat. The frightened animal darted away at a run, heading back

for the Star-M. Buck swung up into his own saddle and grinned down at his former captor.

"Well, mister," he said, "I'll see yuh later. When that Sheriff Hale yuh sent for gits here, tell 'im tuh follow Miss Jessie's tracks. Her hoss throwed a left front shoe on our way down here."

Before the scowling Star-M rider could reply, Buck was away, heading back for the little ravine in which he had left Jessie McCoy.

Behind him, the scowling Star-M puncher slowly rose, shook a fist at him and started walking back to the ranch. Six foot two in his stockinged feet, weighing over two hundred pounds, Shorty Welch—for that was his name—grunted as his high-heeled boots sank into the sand.

"Ef that *hombre's* really Buck Bonner," he growled, "we're shore been a bunch o' fools. But ef he's one o' them Ringer skunks, day'll come when I'll make 'im walk from here tuh hell—an' stay there!"

CHAPTER III

Hell's Million Acres

BACK at the spot where he had left Jessie in the ravine, Buck rode to the top of the pass and studied the country keenly. Here and there, far apart, the riders of the Star-M were moving away at steady lope, riding in pairs. A glance at the sky told him it was about one o'clock.

"If that Tony *hombre* gits tuh Marfa an' brings down th' sheriff an' a posse," he told Blaze, "you an' me'll find ourselves huntin' cover fast. Unless we finds Miss Jessie, my ol' neck won't be worth nuthin' a-tall."

He rode into the ravine, vaulted from his saddle, and studied the ground. Around and around he went, seeking for sign of a horse minus one left front shoe. It was difficult, for the Star-M punchers had, in bringing him here, ridden about the spot. Finally, he picked up one imprint, then another and still another.

Slowly, leading Blaze, he followed the trail. It led up and out of the ravine, then headed straight across the open for the rugged foothills to the east. He swung back into his saddle and rode up to the top of the pass again, to its highest point, and looked for those dots which would mean Star-M punchers searching for Jessie.

But now all had disappeared. The open seemed deserted, except for a few wandering herds of cattle and the bunch of horses being led by that handsome black stallion he had seen before.

He followed the trail at a steady lope. The hoofprints of Jessie's horse were discernible to anyone who was intent on finding them.

Two miles farther he entered the foothills. Here the trail wound about among rough, rocky stretches of badland, where the hoofs of his horse sent forth occasional ringing clicks as they struck stones, try as he would to keep the animal in the sand.

Suddenly, as he rode around an outcropping of great masses of rocky hillside, he jerked to a sliding halt, staring. Before him, not fifty yards away, was a group of some twenty hard-faced men in rough range clothes, and in their midst was Jessie, roped hand and foot in her saddle!

The Ringer gang!

Before she or any of the men could speak, Buck, his mind flashing the fact that delay now meant certain death, dashed directly forward, holding one arm high in pretended excitement. He came to a halt before the group.

"Th' sheriff, fellas!" he shouted. "Them Star-M *hombres* has sent for

'im, an' they got all their riders out, huntin' for this here gal!"

The men eyed him coldly, fingering their guns. One big, burly, unshaven outlaw rode forward, gun half out.

"Yeah?" the man said gruffly. "An' jest who are *you*, mister?"

"My name don't make no difference now," Buck replied in pretended annoyance; "but I'm from Long Horn Yates. Come on, quick, an' let's git tuh Mort Ringer, or we'll shore find our tracks blazin' trail fer a posse."

"An' jest what yuh aimin' tuh do when yuh gits tuh Mort?" the man asked, his eyes holding grimly to Buck's face. "Yuh mean yuh wants tuh join up with us?"

"Say, fella," another outlaw asked, riding close, "yuh from that Long Horn Yates what's been bustin' hell outa New Mexico lately?"

Buck grinned, shoved back his hat, pulled out the makings.

"Reckon yuh've guessed it, son," he replied. "But that country ain't healthy for me or what's left o' my pals. We had a run-in with a pack o' depities over there, down round them Hatchet Hills. I been travelin' sorta fast. Thought mebbe Mort'd gimme a handout fer a while."

He glanced at Jessie. She was staring at him from wide, astonished eyes which, as their glances met, filled with loathing contempt.

"We're losin' time here," he went on. "Them Star-M rannihans an' their posse from Marfa won't be long gittin' down here, way that Tony fella was a-ridin' fer town."

The big outlaw scowled, half drew his gun, rode slightly closer. The other outlaws, grim and threatening, had their hands on their guns.

"Yuh been at th' Star-M, fella?" the big man asked, scowling.

He seemed about to jerk out his gun any instant. Buck eyed him coolly.

"Yeah," he replied. "Had tuh take a chanct, bein' plumb hungry. I rode up to th' ranch few minutes ago, an' heerd shootin'. But when I got there th' place was deserted, 'cept for coupla dead men. Then them Star-M *hombres* comes bustin' up on their broncs an' accused me o' th' killin'. I drawed fast, an' made my gitaway.

"But while they was palaverin' I heerd 'em say some gal on th' ranch had been kidnaped, an' that they was gonna ride like all hell tuh find 'er. They sent a fella called Tony tuh Marfa, after th' sheriff." He reined Blaze around to face the rugged canyons lying to the east. "'Less yuh aims stayin' here tuh scrap th' whole bunch, we better be poundin' leather."

FOR a long, tense moment, the leader studied Buck's face grimly. Then he let his half-drawn gun drop back into its holster and lifted his reins.

"All right," he said gruffly. "Mebbe yuh're from Long Horn Yates an' mebbe yuh're not, but they's a way tuh prove whether yuh're lyin' or not, an' Mort Ringer savvies that way aplenty. Him an' Yates usta be pals." He jerked his horse around towards the hills. "Come on. We're ridin'. I'm Jud Hood, ef yuh want tuh know."

The group broke into a swift lope, entered a canyon and went along in almost single file, over rocky ground. Just behind Hood rode Jessie, her horse led by another outlaw. Near them, Buck rode along hoping to manage a word with her, but as he glanced into her face now and then it was only to meet her look of utter contempt.

"Yuh lowdown, lying rat!" she said, her voice trembling with anger. "You're nothing but a diamond-back rattler. Some day our Star-M boys'll find you, and they'll hang you to the very first tree. Claimed you were

Buck Bonner!" She laughed bitterly, curtly.

Hearing her, the outlaws laughed and eyed Buck with new friendliness. Buck winked at them, grinning.

"Little hell-cat, fellas, eh?" he remarked.

"She'll git tamed down right soon," one man grinned, "oncet we gits 'er tuh Mort!"

Buck's eyes hardened as a rush of fury swept him. A captured outlaw over in New Mexico had once told him of Mort Ringer. And the man had also told him of Long Horn Yates, said to be the fastest man in all the Southwest on the double draw, and who would never accept a man into his gang who could not qualify in that trick.

BUCK'S jaw clamped tight as he rode along, his brain fighting for some plan to save Jessie from what might lie ahead in these devil-made fastnesses of the Big Bend. A fierce desire came over him to drag out both his guns and fight things out against all these human beasts. But it was a hopeless tactic.

For two long hours they rode through twisting canyons. Buck judged it to be about three in the afternoon. The sun blazed down scorchingly. Dust rose about the group in small clouds. He glanced again into Jessie's face and marveled that she showed no sign of being tired. Sitting her saddle erectly, she swayed lithely with every move and step of her horse, head erect and eyes staring ahead haughtily. He knew her arms, tied behind her back, must be aching in every muscle.

Frequently, he looked down at her horse's tracks—tracks minus that one left front shoe. It stood out plainly, time after time, among the other tracks.

And it gave him hope.

"That Star-M buckaroo musta reached th' ranch long ago, even afoot," ran his thoughts, "an' I told 'em tuh look for her tracks. By now his riders must be headin' back for th' ranch—at least some of 'em—so he'll have their help. An' that Tony fella musta reached Marfa by now, an' told th' sheriff. That means a posse's mebbe on its way down tuh th' Star-M right this minute, an' they'll be coverin' these hills like a pack o' wolf hounds on th' scent."

But Hell's Million Acres lay all about him, and those acres were a ghastly maze. A thousand canyons broke off to right and left. It would demand the noses of bloodhounds to follow these criminals to their lair. Buck's eyes studied the twistings and turnings grimly, and through his mind ran one conviction. It was up to him to save Jessie McCoy from these demons of the wasteland—and up to him alone!

Listening to the outlaws as they talked among themselves, he pieced together the story of the attack on the Star-M. It had been a spite attack on Mort Ringer's part. It had been he who had led the gang against the ranch; he who had fired the first shots that had killed old Jim Holt and Jake McCoy.

Then the gang had driven away a big herd of Star-M cattle and horses. Another part of the gang was even now driving the rustled stock into these mountain fastnesses, heading for a hangout known to the outlaws as Snake Canyon.

Mort Ringer had gone with the men with the stock, and was probably now waiting in Snake Canyon for these men to arrive with Jessie. It became plain, as Buck listened, that these men did not suspect that he and Jessie had had that fight with the three men back near the Alamitos ruins. In fact, they laughed among themselves at how chagrined those three men would be when they came riding into the hangout, to find the

girl had been captured in that ravine back near the Star-M.

And on the group rode, farther and farther into the grim fastnesses of Hell's Million Acres.

CHAPTER IV

The Double Draw

JUST as sunset was settling over the western peaks, the group reached Snake Canyon, through which a little creek flowed. Several hundred head of cattle, still dusty and moaning restlessly from the long drive, grazed about. Buck saw the brands—all Star - M stuff. Some twenty good horses were among the cattle, and these, too, bore old Jake McCoy's brand.

"Reckon Mort's arrived," went through Buck's mind. The thought made his jaw stiffen. "An' he knows Long Horn Yates!"

Halfway down the big canyon, where it opened out into a grass-covered valley, appeared two adobe houses and several corrals. A dozen or so men in dirty range clothes were loafing near them. Saddled horses, with dragging reins, grazed nearby. Jud Hood headed straight for the buildings. Before one of them he drew to a halt and shouted:

"Mort, come on out yere! We're brung yuh a coupla guests."

The front door of the house swung open and a tall, powerfully built man stepped forth. Buck studied him keenly, unable to repress admiration for the man's tremendous physique. Mort Ringer was at least six foot three, with magnificent chest and shoulders. He looked about thirty, and had good features. At his hips swung two heavy, ivory-handled six-guns in carved leather holsters. It was only in the eyes that the cruel nature of the outlaw chief revealed itself. As he saw Jessie, his eyes took on a basilisk look and his tongue slid over his lips as he smiled. He strolled close to her horse, unroped her hands and feet.

"Well, well, gal! Shore glad tuh see yuh here. Looks like my boys been treatin' yuh sorta rough, usin' all them ropes. I'll have tuh make it up tuh yuh. Come on an' git down, so I kin git a good look at yuh." He reached up to help her from her horse.

But Jessie jerked back from him.

The outlaw chief laughed softly, amusedly. His eyes held the cold light of a rattler.

"Let me go," she begged. "Dad'll pay you—"

"I reckon I know how tuh git *my* pay, all right," he said, his gaze traveling over her gloatingly. "Besides, ain't never no sendin' yuh back tuh yore father. He's plumb outa th' picture." Suddenly he reached up to jerk her from her saddle and his eyes hardened with impatience. "Come on, git down, gal. I've waited long enough!"

Jessie jerked up her reins, tried to whirl her horse away. Mort Ringer cursed, caught her reins and dragged the animal around again. Another instant and she was torn from the saddle and struggling in his massive arms, striking at his face with both her small fists, her blue eyes blazing.

The outlaw chief chuckled, bent her back so that his lips were just above her mouth. Around him, the outlaws laughed raucously.

"Come on," Ringer said, "gimme a kiss so's th' boys kin see how yuh love me."

Buck's strong, bronzed hands tensed on his saddle horn. His lips tightened into a white line. To draw now meant instant death and Jessie's abandonment to the beast now holding her against his chest. He took a lighted cigarette from between his lips and lowered it against Blaze's neck. He gave a low hiss.

Instantly, the horse flew into the air, bucking wildly, squealing, sunfishing. The diversion caused Mort Ringer to release Jessie and leap out of the way. The other men scattered slightly, yelling delight at a scene which they loved—a strong rider on a wild bucker. Jessie staggered back, her cheeks still flushed with anger. She turned to run. But the vastness of Hell's Million Acres confronted her on all sides, and her horse was not at hand.

JERKING up his pinto's head, Buck grinned around at Ringer. Blaze stood quiet again.

"Sorry, Mort," Buck said. "Never can tell when this here pinto's gonna wrap his head around his tail. But he's a good young bronc, most times." He did not glance at Jessie.

Mort Ringer laughed. "Yuh shore stuck 'im, fella," he said admiringly. Then he turned towards the other house and shouted: "Carmencita, come on out here, *pronto!*"

The door of the second adobe opened and a pock-marked, black-eyed Mexican woman slouched out, wearing a soiled apron and wiping her hands on a greasy rag. She eyed the scene with inscrutable eyes.

"Take this here gal inside, Carmencita," Ringer ordered, "an' keep 'er there. Git cookin' a meal for two. I'll be in later."

The woman gripped Jessie's arm. Jessie tried to shake her off, but the repulsive creature jerked her closer, lifted her in her arms as though she had been a child, and strode back towards the house from which she had come. Every foot of the way, Jessie fought desperately, striking at the woman's ugly face, kicking with both booted feet.

The outlaws laughed loudly. Mort Ringer stood grinning, strong white teeth showing. The woman passed inside.

"Yuh shore got a wild one this time, Mort," Jud Hood guffawed. "She most scratched my eyes out when we caught 'er, back in a ravine near the Star-M.

"What was she doin' in a ravine, Jud?" Ringer asked.

"Said she war waitin' for a fella named Buck Bonner. Told us he'd cut us down with hot lead soon's he got back. But we didn't have no time tuh waste thataway. I grabs 'er an' she shore went haywire!" He rubbed a few scratches on his rough, unshaven face and grinned.

Then he motioned towards Buck. "This fella come ridin' up tuh us in th' hills. Says he's from Long Horn Yates an' wants tuh join with us a while. Says them New Mexican depities got too durned clost."

The outlaw chief turned slowly and looked at Buck, studying him from head to foot. Buck had dismounted and was holding his pinto's reins and casually rolling a cigarette, hat shoved back from his moist forehead.

"From Long Horn Yates, eh?" the outlaw chief said slowly, an odd look in his changeable eyes. "An' what do yuh call yourself, fella?"

Buck's mind was working fast. He knew there had been a fight between the Long Horn Yates gang and a posse over in New Mexico recently, and had heard that one of the slain outlaws had been called the Gila Kid. He sent the fresh cigarette across the end of his tongue, poked the smoke between his lips and slid a match along his chaps.

"Some calls me th' Gila Kid, Mort," he replied coolly as he cupped his hands and lit the cigarette.

Mort Ringer's eyes narrowed, grew cold, but the slight smile about his lips remained. He nodded slowly.

"Good as any," he said. "I've heard o' yuh. Put yore hoss in th' corral an' then go inside my house an' make yoreself at home. I'll be back soon."

The outlaw chief walked away with Jud Hood. Buck saw him stop for an instant and say something to a huge, bearded man who was leaning idly against a hitch-rail some yards away. The bearded man glanced towards Buck for a swift second, then went on smoking his pipe.

Buck led Blaze over to the corral. He tied the reins loosely to one of the bars, and kicked some loose hay under the pinto's front feet. He glanced back towards the hitch-rack. The bearded man was still leaning there, watching him with expressionless face. Buck knew he was under surveillance. Nonchalantly he strolled to the house. He felt the bearded man's eyes on him all the way.

Inside he closed the front door and looked about him.

He was in a large, crudely furnished living room. Bunks along one wall, saddles and bridles against another, rough tables and boxes for chairs, half a dozen lariats hanging from pegs, a bottle of whiskey and several glasses on a shelf. At the rear of the room were several closed doors, evidently leading into the kitchen and, maybe, bedrooms or storerooms. From behind one door came the clattering of dishes being washed.

He moved slowly across the room, softly, hands on gun-butts. Perhaps one of the doors led outside, behind the house. Determined to get the layout of the place before Mort Ringer came back, Buck reached out for the doorknob at one side of the room.

"Steady, *hombre!*" a voice said. "Mort don't allow no snoopin' 'round."

Buck whirled towards the sound. The bearded man was looking in through an open window, a huge, trail-worn Stetson on his shaggy head, and the muzzle of a rifle projected over the sill. Buck thought he had never seen a more vicious face.

"An' that don't mean mebbe!" another voice said from the opposite end of the room.

Again Buck turned. Looking in from another window there, holding a six-gun over the sill, another man, as vicious-looking as the first, watched with grim eyes.

It needed no words to tell Buck that he was a prisoner. He leaned against a table in the middle of the room, took out the makings and rolled a cigarette.

Buck was in a tight spot, and he knew it.

HE strolled to a chair, sat down, cocked his feet up on a table and drew in deep whiffs of smoke, cocking his hat down over one eye. But his hearing was straining to the breaking point.

What was happening to Jessie, in the other house?

If he made a single move to go outside, these men at the window would shoot him down like a dog; and, if he did *not* go out and fight his way to Jessie—

And then, Mort Ringer stepped into the doorway. A curious smile flashed over his face as he looked at Buck.

He motioned to the men at the windows.

"All right, boys," he said to them. "Go eat."

The heads at the windows vanished. Jud Hood appeared at the door, thumbs hanging in his gun-belt. He gazed at Buck steadily, without smiling, without scowling; just a steady stare. His thick fingers, tapping slowly against his belt, just above his guns, held their own significance.

Buck did not move. Drawing in a mouthful of smoke from his cigarette,

he sent the smoke ascending in small circles. So long as Mort Ringer was here, Jessie was safe for the time.

The outlaw chief drew up a chair and sat down, leaned back and studied Buck's face. The steel-like look in his eyes held no hint of friendliness.

Ringer drew out tobacco and papers from his shirt pocket and started rolling a cigarette. He crossed one long leg over the other. Buck observed handsome, ornately carved boots with spurs whose rowels were made of twenty-dollar gold pieces. His batwing chaps gleamed with silver *conchas.*

"So yuh comes from Long Horn Yates, eh?" Ringer said at last. "I usta know Long Horn mighty well. We was pals. He trained every member o' his gang tuh sling lead some plenty an' fast. Wouldn't keep no other kind. Had a partic'lar trick every man had tuh learn by heart." Suddenly he leaned forward, his eyes gleaming. "What was that trick, Gila Kid?"

Buck's brain was on fire. He glanced at Jud Hood standing in the doorway. The outlaw was eyeing him steadily, grimly, and still doing that light tapping of his fingers against his gun-butts. Death seemed to hover close. Buck possessed powerful self-control when facing danger. He remained relaxed, outwardly, while his brain leaped to every story of Long Horn Yates that he had ever heard. The New Mexican outlaw had been famous for his lightning gun-play — and for the double draw.

Buck leaned back and smiled. The next five seconds would bring either temporary safety—or death. If his answer were the wrong one— Both men were watching him, waiting, their eyes narrowed.

"Long Horn shore had a heap o' tricks, Mort," Buck said coolly. "But th' best one was th' double draw. He shore made us work hard on that one."

The steel-like grimness of Mort Ringer's eyes seemed to relax somewhat. He settled back in his chair. For an instant he glanced at Jud Hood and the latter slowly nodded. Then Ringer rose.

"Come outside!" he said to Buck curtly. "Follow Jud."

He waited for Buck to go past him, then followed. Stalking out into the open space in front of the adobe buildings, big Jud Hood led the way. Thirty hard-faced outlaws were standing about. They eyed Buck scowlingly. He wondered what lay ahead.

Not a sound came from the house in which Jessie had been carried by the Mexican woman.

In the middle of the open space, Jud Hood stopped. The other outlaws came closer, stood watching, their hands resting on their gun-butts.

Mort Ringer strode off to one side, then turned and faced Buck.

"Well, fella," he said harshly, "yuh've told yore yarn about comin' from Long Horn Yates, an' now we're givin' yuh a chance tuh prove yuh ain't lyin'. Git ready for the double draw!"

BUCK'S pulses leaped. Mort Ringer's meaning was plain. Either Buck must prove his expertness in one of the most difficult forms of all six-gun shooting, or be shot down by the whole gang as an impostor.

He glanced around. Every outlaw was fingering his gun-butts and watching him steadily. Some faces registered contempt, others mere curiosity.

"At least two in each can, Gila Kid," Mort Ringer stated coldly, "or it's wooden clothes for yuh! Git set, an' turn at th' yell." He spoke to Jud Hood. "Jud, *you* toss up th' cans an' give th' yawp."

CHAPTER V

The Chase

THE double draw requires the utmost skill and steadiness, and the eye of an eagle. A man must stand with his back to the firing point, guns in holsters, and, at a yell, turn and draw both guns at once and fire at two cans tossed high in the air. At least two hits must be made in each can before they struck the ground.

Buck's life was at stake, but not a man there read his anxiety. He was thinking of Jessie. Not only his life depended upon his bullets traveling straight to their marks, but Jessie as well.

As he took his position, he glanced toward the house where Jessie had gone. He tensed suddenly, for he saw her face appear in a window for an instant. Then a brown hand reached from behind her and jerked her roughly back. But the glimpse of Jessie's face sent Buck's blood rushing through his veins. His nerves steadied, and he called out to Mort Ringer.

"All set, Mort. Let 'er go!"

"Now!" came Jud Hood's loud yell.

Two tin cans flew in the air.

Like a flash, Buck whirled around. His draw was so lightning-fast that no man present saw his guns leap from their holsters. Their muzzles blazed. The two cans went slithering through the air jerkily. Before they hit the ground, Buck was standing still, his guns by his sides, both empty of cartridges. The outlaws dashed for the cans, picked them up, stared at them in amazement. One man held the two cans high for Mort Ringer to see.

"Four shots in each of 'em, Mort!" he yelled. He looked at Buck. "Fella, that's shore some shootin'!"

Buck smiled. "Am I th' Gila Kid, from Long Horn Yates, or not, Mort?" he asked coolly, reloading his two guns.

"We're takin' yore word, Gila," Ringer said. "Never seen Yates hisself put more'n three in each can. Fella, he shore taught yuh!" But, though there was the ring of sincerity in his voice, Buck saw the basilisk light in the outlaw chief's eyes. "Go back in my shack now, an' wait for me. Meantime, Jud an' me'll take a squint at them Star-M cattle."

His other words, as he and Jud Hood walked away, Buck could not hear. Some of the outlaws were still examining the two cans. Others were going towards the corrals to feed the horses. At the hitch-rails, just beyond the two houses, a dozen saddled and bridled horses were munching hay—evidently the animals that would be used for night herding the rustled cattle.

A sudden inspiration leaped into Buck's mind. He strolled over to the corral in which he had left Blaze, leaned on the corral bars and studied the pinto keenly. The rest and feed had done Blaze a lot of good. At Buck's approach, the animal lifted its head and whinnied. Buck grinned.

"Wantin' *agua*, eh, Blaze?" he said.

Going inside the corral, he led his pinto outside to a watering trough and allowed the horse to drink its fill. Then, instead of taking Blaze back inside the corral, he tied him lightly to a hitch-rack just beyond the houses, where several saddled horses were standing.

"Old-timer," Buck said, "I'm tyin' yuh here tuh be handy; an' yuh may have tuh carry single or double, accordin' tuh what breaks."

With a final slap on the pinto's neck, Buck strolled back past the house in which Jessie was being held. Every shade was down.

He passed on to Ringer's house,

went inside and stood looking around, wondering if those two guards were still outside the windows. That he was still under suspicion, he was certain. He walked first to one window, then to the other. Over beside an old wagon stood the two men who had stood at the windows before. They were leaning against the wagon, talking and smoking. He ducked back before they saw him. Evening had come. The moon was high, and its light reflected on rifle barrels in the two men's hands.

A WILD scream pealed out from the other house—a girl's scream fraught with terror! It chilled his blood for the instant. He stopped in his tracks, listening, and heard the running footsteps of the two men coming from the wagon. They were headed not for Jessie's house, but for his!

In a flash, he was across the room and beside one of the rear doors. He whirled the knob and the door flew open, but, as he started through, two shots roared out from the windows. Bullets whined past his head and crashed into the woodwork.

He plunged headlong into the rear room and slammed shut the bullet-pocked door behind him.

It was a small storeroom, with a rear door leading outside to the back of the house. Leaping to it, he tried the knob. It was unlocked. He peered out. Not a soul was in sight. But a plan flashed to his brain.

"If I can make everybody come here," was his thought, "it'll gimme a chance tuh git tuh Jessie."

He raced back into the living room, guns out. Through the front door, the big bearded man was stalking, rifle in hand. Behind him appeared other outlaw faces. Those two shots of the guards had brought other men. The bearded man's rifle leaped up and flamed. Buck ducked, and his right hand gun roared twice. The man fell headlong, blood streaming from his throat. The other men behind him darted out of sight outside. A man screamed in agony as Buck fired again.

Dashing back to the rear of the room, Buck jerked open the rear door, rushed into the storeroom, crossed it in one leap, tore open the outer door and got outside. His hand touched a hinge and padlock. Instantly he snapped the padlock, locking the door through which he had just passed. Men inside were yelling and coming toward the door. Above the other voices, he heard that of Mort Ringer's shouting commands.

Buck tore open a rear window of her house and vaulted inside, into a lighted room furnished with a bed and some chairs.

In the center of the room, was Jessie, struggling furiously with the Mexican woman, who was trying to lash her with a rawhide rope! Jessie's cheek was bleeding where the cruel rope had cut a gash, and her clothing was torn.

In one bound Buck had the woman by the shoulders. He thrust her back, forced her against a wall and held her there. The creature cursed and clawed at him with talonlike nails.

But Buck flung her to the floor, jerked her arms behind her back, and roped them tightly with the rawhide lariat she had been using on Jessie. Then he grabbed Jessie by the hand.

"Come on, quick!" he cried. "Those outlaws are all over in the other house! After me."

Too frightened to speak, Jessie let him lift her through the window. They raced side by side among the cottonwoods, then stopped as they heard the stamping of horses.

"Wait here, Jessie!" Buck whispered. "I'll get horses." He re-

turned to her in a moment, leading Blaze. "Mount, quick!" he ordered.

The outlaws, back around the two houses, were yelling to one another as they darted about. Mort Ringer's heavy voice rose above the others. Jessie was in the saddle in a second. Together they tore away through the night at breakneck speed. But not before some of the outlaws saw them.

Wild yells came, and shots barked out. Bullets whined past their heads. Then came Mort Ringer's voice again.

"Come on, five of yuh!" he shouted. "We're gittin' them two back, damn 'em. Th' rest o' yuh bust th' wind for th' Star-M an' burn it down from chimneys tuh cellar, so's they can't hole up there!"

As Buck and Jessie raced around a cliff, thundering hoofs sounded behind them. The death chase was on!

CHAPTER VI

The Siege

AT headlong speed, twisting through canyon after canyon, Buck and Jessie raced faster through the moonlit night. Steel-shod hoofs rang against stone.

But those unavoidable sounds carried far—far enough to reach the ears of the pursuing outlaws, whose yells could be heard back among the hills as they followed the trail.

"We'll head for Marfa, Jessie," Buck shouted against the wind. He had wholly forgotten her contempt, and now her reply brought it back to him.

"But—but you told them you wanted to join them—that you are the Gila Kid," she answered, staring at him wonderingly. "I don't understand. Are you Buck Bonner or—"

Buck sent his horse closer to hers as they flew along.

"Easy," he grinned. "I was followin' yore trail an' run right plumb intuh them *hombres* what was holdin' yuh. Had tuh talk fast. So I played outlaw. Th' Gila Kid gent was killed a month ago, over in New Mexico."

Shots rang out to their left. Buck turned in his saddle, whipped out his guns and drove a volley of shots in reply. A bullet shot had seared his arm. Blood oozed through his sleeve.

Mort Ringer was hanging to the trail like a wolf. Suddenly Buck and Jessie reached a wide open space of rangeland which allowed them to ride faster than before.

From the crags behind came shrieking lead as the outlaws ripped out shot after shot at them. Suddenly Jessie's horse leaped wildly, almost unseating her, and let out a scream. The gallant animal raced on for another two hundred yards, then crashed down.

Jessie was thrown headlong from the saddle. Buck raced to her. Back along the trail the outlaws were coming at full speed, a scant mile away.

"Hurt, Jessie?" Buck asked anxiously.

"No—only jarred a bit," Jessie gasped as she staggered to her feet.

"Quick, then," Buck urged. "Give me your hand."

In a moment she was behind Buck's saddle. He drove home his spurs with all his might. Blaze, revealing superb power, stretched out again at full speed, leaping boulders, mesquite, occasional small ditches created by flood waters in the past. Strong as he was, the pinto, however, could never keep up this pace. Buck knew it, gritted his teeth in anxiety. Slowly but surely, the outlaws were gaining. Now and then their yells could be heard.

"We cain't make Marfa thisaway, Jessie," Buck said over his shoulder. "Too far, even for Blaze, him carryin' double. We'll head for them Alamitos ruins an' hole up till it gits darker. Then we'll try makin' our gitaway."

Whang! A bullet tore through Buck's flesh, high up on his shoulder. Another, which screeched past within an inch of Jessie's head. Buck glanced backward. One man, on a white horse, was closing in fast, evidently better mounted than the rest. Buck twisted around in his saddle, riding in one stirrup, letting his reins slide loose. Over Jessie's shoulder he ripped out a string of shots. The outlaw cried out, flung out his arms and pitched heels over head to the ground.

But Buck could not continue to ride half twisted around like that in his saddle—not at such a thundering gait. Even Blaze required some guidance by the reins.

"Give me a gun, Buck!" Jessie cried. "You guide and I'll do the shooting!"

Jerking Buck's other gun from its holster, she twisted half around. As another rider appeared out of the shadows, she poured a stream of shots at the man, and the outlaw's horse plunged to earth. Buck whirled into still another canyon. It proved to be steep, and Blaze went sliding down with stiffened front legs, in crow-hops. At the bottom, Buck whirled the horse to the west and dashed on.

Above them, the outlaws halted, cursing. Buck and Jessie were racing under cottonwoods and around rocky bluffs, shielded from danger. As the outlaws started to ride down the bluffs slowly, Buck and Jessie reached another open valley and plunged on. A few hundred yards ahead there suddenly sounded the clatter of hoofs. Jerking Blaze to a sliding halt, Buck stared grimly, gun high and ready, his eyes narrow slits of steel.

"Looke like some've got 'round ahead of us, Jessie," he muttered grimly. "If so, we'll—"

But he broke off with a gasp of surprise, for a small herd of loose horses came trotting straight towards them. And in the lead was that great black stallion Buck had seen near the Alamitos ruins. The sight of a mounted man did not seem to disturb the animal. Buck's eyes suddenly gleamed. He holstered his gun in a flash and jerked loose his rawhide lariat.

"Git off for a minute, Jessie," he said. "Here's where we gits a fresh bronc, *pronto*. 'Less we do, Blaze'll shore be staggerin' before we ride another two miles."

Jessie slid to the ground. Buck, loop held ready, rode slowly towards the horse herd. Some of the animals nickered as he rode closer.

"Thank God yuh're ranch-broke, broncs," he muttered. "If yuh was wild, yuh'd be skeedaddlin' like all hell!"

WITHOUT haste, he circled the herd. And then, like a flash, he made his cast. The loop fell over the head of the stallion and settled around its neck. For a moment, as Buck jerked the rope tight, the splendid horse reared and pawed and jerked back, but as he rode nearer and spoke quietly, the horse stood still.

Another half minute and Buck had made a war-bridle out of his rope and was on the stallion's back. Racing the horse back to Jessie and leading Blaze, he held Blaze as she mounted, and tossed her the pinto's reins.

Far back in the hills, a voice yelled and another answered, but that steep bluff back there had been a blessing in disguise to Buck and Jessie. The outlaws had taken their

time in making the dangerous descent and they had lost a lot of distance.

"We'll git clear of them *hombres* yit, Jessie," Buck grinned as they raced on towards the Alamitos ruins. "But I'm bettin' Mort Ringer never gives up a trail. If they comes too clost, yuh light out fast and bust th' wind for town."

"And leave you to fight all those outlaws alone?" Jessie asked, still holding one of his guns in her hand. "Dad would be ashamed of me. But why not head for home, Buck?"

Buck's eyes glanced away. He had forgotten, in all the excitement, that she did not yet know her father had been killed. Apparently she had not heard Mort Ringer order half of his outlaw gang to ride to the Star-M and burn it down to the ground.

"Reckon we better git tuh them old ruins first," he replied, "an' hole up there a while. Yore father's riders is all out, searchin' for yuh, an' some'll shore come by them Alamitos shacks.

"Guess them fellas is all lookin' for *me*, too," his thoughts ran as they galloped along. "And if anything happens tuh Jessie so's she can't tell 'em th' truth, maybe I'll be decoratin' one of these Big Bend cottonwoods before my next meal." The thought brought an amused light into his grey eyes. "Comin' here in answer tuh Jim Holt's letter's shore brung queer happenin's." He glanced into Jessie's face. She was staring ahead, riding hard, and with no sign of fear in her face. His eyes glowed anew. "But it's also brung her," came into his mind. "Shore glad I come."

On they raced, neck and neck. The black stallion was proving a wonderful animal. The hoofbeats and yells of their pursuers had died away. About them now reigned silence.

"Reckon we've beat 'em *hombres* at last," he said. "Shore great tuh have these two broncs. Ain't never rode better ones,"

AS THEY dashed up to the Alamitos ruins a little later, the old ranch buildings stood out clearly in the moonlight. Complete silence surrounded the place. The window openings, from which the frames had long since fallen away, looked like square black holes leading into mysterious interiors.

A door creaked in the wind, swinging loosely back and forth. A coyote darted from one of the corrals nearby and went running away among the foothills, a streak of greyish yellow. Buck and Jessie swung down from their saddles.

"We'll lead our hosses inside," Buck said, "outa sight." Then he grinned. "An' I hope we find somethin' tuh eat. I'm shore starved."

They led their lathered horses through the open doorway. Through the window openings, the moonlight gleamed, giving enough light to see things dimly. They were in a large, vacant room, back of which appeared several doors. The old flooring of wood was warped and part missing. Against one wall stood a rough wooden table and two boxes which had evidently been used as seats.

Opening one of the rear doors, Buck peered into the shadow. It was merely an open shed, with a manger.

"Watch from th' windows, Jessie," Buck said, "while I tie our broncs back here. If yuh sees or hears anything, yell out."

Taking her reins, he led the pinto and the black into the shed and tied their reins to the manger. Feeling of the cinches and finding the hard riding had slightly loosened both, he started tightening them, and then jerked erect, tense, as a cry

rang out from Jessie. Jerking out his guns, Buck rushed inside—to see her struggling in the arms of two men in range clothes.

Buck dared not shoot. He used the butt of his gun instead, crashing it down on one man's head, sending him down in a heap. The other man, releasing Jessie, struck at Buck with savage force. Buck ducked, clinched with him. Back and forth they swayed, battling furiously, each gripping the other's gun-wrist and striking with their left fists, kicking with their big-rowelled spurs. They stumbled against the table and it crashed down in a heap. They sprawled apart.

"Stop, or I'll shoot!"

JESSIE'S voice, tense and shrill, rang out through the room. Buck, staggering to his feet and bracing against the other man's rush, glanced around. The first man had risen and was coming forward, gun in hand, his face smeared with blood and working savagely, his eyes riveted to Buck's face. But Jessie was standing between the man and Buck, and Buck saw her gun flash upward. The second man leaped. As Buck ducked, a shot roared through the room. Leaping back, Buck looked again at the other man and at Jessie. From her muzzle, white smoke was rising, and the outlaw clutched his shoulder. The gun clattered from his fingers. The man keeled over with a thud, arms outsprawled, and lay still. Buck whirled back to the other outlaw.

But the other had gained advantage in that brief space. His guns were out—blazed. Buck ducked in time, lunged at the man's legs. The man fell. In a second Buck was astride his back, pinning the man's two hands to the floor.

"Grab his gun, Jessie!" Buck called.

But the man under him was powerful, huge. He twisted over on his back and flashed up one gun. Buck rolled aside and his own revolver spat again. The outlaw collapsed. Buck staggered to his feet, looked down. The outlaw was dead.

But the outlaw whom Jessie had shot was moaning. Buck stepped beside him, kicked away the man's guns.

"Who are yuh?" Buck asked.

"Mort Ringer's men, stranger," the man confessed in a weak voice. "He sent us here tuh git some more rifles an' ammunition what's cached up in th' loft. We thought yuh was a—a sheriff—" Then his head rolled to one side and a deep sigh came from his lips. His eyes closed. Buck leaned down. The outlaw was breathing, but unconscious. He was bleeding very little. Shock had put him out.

"How'd they git in?" Buck wondered.

"Came through the front door, Buck," Jessie told him. "Just as you were tying up our horses. They had me before I could move. But I yelled, and you—came in time again." Her voice quivered as she looked into his eyes, her own warm with gratitude and faith.

But suddenly they both tensed again. Out across the moonlit desert horses' hoofs were sounding once more. Jessie's hands gripped his arms and she pressed against him, staring at the open doorway. Unconsciously, his arm went about her, held her close. His grey eyes flashed and his hand clawed down for his gun.

"Reckon that's them Ringer skunks. We're shore holed up all right, if it is." He looked around the room. A crude rotten ladder was fastened against one wall. Above, a small square hole appeared. "An attic!" he exclaimed. "Quick. We'll git up there an' lay still."

Scrambling up the ladder, they

climbed into an almost pitchdark attic, and crawled on hands and knees away from the hole. The old shingle roof was scarcely five feet high in the center, and sloped to front and rear the whole length of the house. Where it joined the walls it was a bare three feet above the attic floor.

Punching a hole through the decayed shingles just back of the front wall, Buck looked out. Below and slightly to the left, a small porch at the front door faced the open desert beyond. A group of horsemen approached at a gallop. Buck's eyes hardened as he watched them.

"They're comin' on th' run," he told Jessie, "but too far away yet tuh make shore who they are. I'll watch. You take a look for them rifles an' that ammunition that fella told us about. He said it was up here."

Jessie crawled away in the dark. A moment later she called softly:

"Here they are, Buck—Winchesters and some boxes of cartridges; and a couple of saddles and lariats."

"*'Sta bueno,*" Buck called back. "Looks like we'll shore be needin' 'em." He crawled over beside her.

Together they moved the rifles and boxes of cartridges near the hole Buck had poked through the roof. Working rapidly, their fingers clumsy in the dark, they loaded each rifle and set the extra cartridge boxes handy, their pasteboard lids torn open for instant use. Then Buck looked through the hole again as the pounding of hoofs sounded out in front, close this time.

"It's Ringer an' his gang!" he whispered hoarsely to Jessie. "Don't make a sound!"

The outlaws dismounted, left their horses with dragging reins and came stamping into the room below. Yells rose as they saw the body of the dead outlaw and the unconscious man Jessie had shot. Foul curses blasted the stillness. Then Mort Ringer's voice sounded:

"Drag 'em outside, fellas. We'll attend tuh 'em later. Ain't time now."

BUCK and Jessie lay still, side by side. They heard the outlaws drag out the two men below. And then Ringer's voice again:

"Git movin', boys!" he shouted. "They was headin' this way, last time we seen 'em. That damn' cliff held us back, gave 'em a start, but they ain't gittin' away from us. Plug th' *hombre* what calls hisself th' Gila Kid. But don't nobody hurt th' gal."

Footsteps below told Buck and Jessie that the outlaws were searching swiftly. Then a shout came from one.

"Here's their broncs, Mort," the outlaw said. "Pinto still bridled an' saddled, an' th' black with th' warbridle still on. Both of 'em sweatin', too."

"Then they're shore clost, boys," Ringer yelled gleefully. "A hundred dollars tuh whichever of yuh gits that Gila Kid *hombre* first—"

More clattering of boots sounded, more shouting. Buck crawled across the attic floor to the hole above the ladder and peeped down. Mort Ringer, gun in hand, was standing near the front door, his big hat pulled low over his eyes. The other outlaws had gone outside and Buck heard them calling to one another.

Powerful desire to shoot the outlaw chief down then and there, surged through him, but his better judgment told him to withhold his fire. His shot would only make matters worse by bringing the rest of the gang inside at a run. He crawled back beside Jessie.

"Best thing is tuh lie still up here," he told her. "Mebbe they'll miss this attic an' ride away, huntin' for us. Then we'll make a break for our hosses an' skin out."

Jessie reached out in the dark and pressed his hand.

"You're a fine man, Buck," she whispered close to his ear, "but we haven't got a fiddler's chance. The showdown has to come, and we'll fight to the last—together. Ringer sent those first two men up to these ruins to get these rifles and he must know this attic is up here. They'll be coming up soon—"

Buck squeezed her hand in the dark. "An' when they come up, Jessie," he whispered grimly, "I'll git 'em, one by one, so help me God. They'll never lay hand on yuh while I live."

Clouds of dust came floating up from the room below. Those tramping boots had stirred it from the age-old flooring. And suddenly it choked in Buck's throat. He coughed in spite of himself.

CHAPTER VII

Fire!

INSTANTLY, Mort Ringer leaped to the center of the room below, whipped up his guns, dropped into a half crouch and stared up. A curse burst from him. Buck, peeping down again, gun ready to blaze, saw the outlaw chief's grim face in the moonlight.

"They're up in th' attic, fellas!" the outlaw roared. "Come a-runnin'!"

The other men rushed inside and grouped about him, all staring up. They held their guns ready to flame.

"Come on down, *hombre!*" Ringer yelled up. "We're gittin' yuh like we got Jim Holt an' old McCoy. Gila Kid, eh? Come down!"

Beside Buck, Jessie gasped chokingly. Her hand clutched his arm tensely.

"Oh, Buck, Buck!" she whispered hoarsely against his ear. "Did they kill Dad and old Jim? A sob suddenly tore from her lips. And the men below heard it.

"Send th' gal down first, *hombre!*" Ringer shouted. "An' make it *pronto* or we'll plug yuh both to hell!"

Buck slid back quietly and dragged one Winchester beside him just back of the opening. Then he peeped down again, keeping his head out of sight.

"Come on up, *hombres!*" Buck's voice held the grim purpose of a fighting man with his back to the wall. "I'll shore enjoy picking yuh off that ladder, one skunk at a time."

He slid the Winchester forward until its muzzle could blaze down on the men below.

"Aw, hell, Mort," one outlaw said disgustedly, "let's burn 'em out. We're wastin' time *habla-in'* thisaway." He fired up.

The next instant, Buck's rifle roared. The speaker, with a low grunt, crumpled to the floor. The rest of the men, led by Ringer, dashed outside. Buck grimly looked down through the opening. Jessie, beside him, stared down from wide eyes; and she, too, was now gripping one of the rifles.

"He had it coming, Buck," she whispered to him. "But now they'll burn us out." Her hand reached out, gripped his warmly. "We're cornered, Buck, and you know it. You're giving your life for me. Maybe, if I go down and plead with them—"

"Didja ever try pleadin' with a pack o' timber wolves, Jessie?" Buck asked grimly.

They heard Mort Ringer's voice.

"Git gatherin' brush, fellas. We'll smoke 'em out." He called to Buck from the outside: "We're givin' yuh five minutes tuh send th' gal down, fella. Take it or leave it! Ef yuh wants her tuh burn tuh death, keep 'er up there with yuh."

"And if I send 'er down, Ringer," Buck shouted back, "what then?"

"We'll give yuh our word we'll ride away with 'er *pronto* an' then yuh kin hit out fer parts unknown."

Buck pressed Jessie's hand. "Ain't he th' kindhearted soul?" he whispered amusedly. "Come on. Let's git back tuh that hole in th' roof. I can see more. They're all outside now."

Through the hole he had made with his gun-muzzle, he looked out. He could hear the outlaws running about gathering brush, shouting to one another as they piled it against the front door and the little porch, but not a man could he see.

"Ringer shore hates yore Star-M, Jessie," Buck said. "He killed yore father and old Jim Holt; he's got us bottled up in here; and he's sent a bunch o' his gang tuh burn yore ranch itself. I heard 'im send 'em away from their hangout. That's why I couldn't head for there when yuh asked me."

"Ringer," Jessie said, "has been after the Star-M ever since Dad killed his sidekick in that old fight between rustlers and our cowmen. I'd rather be dead than fall into his hands."

In the dark of the attic, Buck drew her to him in one arm, held her firmly. Drawing out one of his guns, he passed it into her hand.

"Hang ontuh it, Jessie," he said huskily. "If they git me, ain't but th' one way out for yuh, 'less a miracle happens an' yore riders git here fast."

Crouching close beside him under the hole in the roof, she suddenly slipped her arms about his neck.

"I—understand, Buck," she murmured. "If the worst comes to the worst—"

Suddenly his arms were about her, his face close against hers.

"I—I love yuh, Jessie!" he whispered hoarsely. "If we git outa here—"

"And I love you, Buck—whatever happens." She lifted her face until it touched his.

Their lips met briefly. Then the sound of crackling flames came from outside. The old ranchhouse was on fire!

Over the rugged mountains to the east, the first streak of dawn appeared. Down in the shed behind the house, Blaze and the black stallion began stamping, and whinnied in fright as smoke drifted to their nostrils.

Buck spoke grimly.

"I'm gonna take another look, Jessie. If we gotta die, we'll die fightin'."

MEANWHILE, over on the Star-M, the cowboys sent out by big Shorty Welch to search for Jessie had straggled back, with drawn faces and wearied, lathered horses. After being unhorsed by Buck, Shorty Welch had walked back to the ranch, secured his horse and gone racing away into the hills, hunting everywhere for Jessie, and vowing to himself to shoot Buck on sight.

But he, too, had finally returned to the Star-M, his honest eyes dull with sadness and anxiety.

"God knows where she is, boys," he said. "We've shore combed this old cow country from horns tuh tail, but we might 'a' rode right past her a dozen times in all them durned canyons an' blind arroyos.

"That *hombre* what we caught here an' who said he was Buck Bonner, told me one thing when he legged me off'n my hoss an' went bustin' away on that durned pinto o' his. Said tuh foller Miss Jessie's trail by lookin' for tracks of a bronc what'd throwed its left front shoe. I been lookin' fer them tracks for hours, an' ain't never seen nary one."

"He was jest a dirty, lyin' killer, Shorty," another cowboy exploded

hotly. "Betcha he's right with them Mort Ringer *hombres* this very minute, an's got *her* there, too. I'm bettin' he's one o' th' gang, an' that him an' some o' th' rest o' them outlaws kidnaped her before we seen him here with them two guns in his paws."

Another puncher spoke up. "Reckon after they shot up th' ranch an' kidnaped her, that fella musta come rompin' back, seein' we was all down th' valley with our cattle. He was prob'bly lookin' fer th' boss' *dinero* in th' safe, or somethin'. That durned trick o' his, gittin' us all up in that ravine an' foolin' yuh tuh send us all out after Miss Jessie, give 'im th' chance tuh dump yuh after we left an' make his gitaway. Ef we ever finds her now—"

But he broke off abruptly as pounding hoofbeats sounded from the south. All stared away into the moonlit night, for those hoofbeats told of many riders coming at a swift pace.

"Who kin them fellas be?" Shorty Welch growled. "Comin' like all hell, too. Better grab our guns, boys, an' git cover quick."

ANOTHER half minute and every man was hidden, gripping guns. The thundering hoofs came sweeping on, closer and closer. Suddenly some twenty riders appeared, heading straight for the ranch. Not a Star-M cowboy moved from his hidden position, but, from behind wagon bodies, behind the haystacks, around the corners of the ranch buildings, they watched grimly, thumbs on gun hammers.

The approaching horsemen came dashing forward in a strange silence until they passed inside the wire fence surrounding the buildings. Then a man shouted loudly:

"Git busy, fellas! Set fire tuh every damn' thing they is, like Mort told us. Don't leave a stick standin'."

"Th' Ringer gang, boys!" Shorty Welch yelled from his position behind the corner of a small outhouse. "Turn loose an' give 'em hell!"

And that yell brought swift fire from the outlaws. Their guns flamed streaks of lead. But they met a holocaust of bullets from a dozen directions, as the Star-M punchers went into action.

Caught in a group as they were, with the Star-M men hidden all about, escape was impossible. Inside of ten seconds, half a dozen outlaws lay dead on the ground. Others, shouting, firing, whirling their horses about, got in one another's way confusedly. Another crashing volley from the Star-M men drove two more to earth.

And horses, wounded, catapulted headlong, lay kicking and screaming pitifully.

"Drop yore guns an' shove up yore hands, you *hombres!*" Shorty Welch then shouted. "Quick, by God, or we'll shore mow yuh down tuh th' last man!"

The rest of the outlaws dropped their guns and raised their arms high. The loss of eight of their number in so swift a space of time had driven all fight out of them.

"Fer Gawd's sake, don't shoot no more!" one wounded outlaw yelled. "We give up."

Holding their guns ready for instant action, the Star-M punchers came from their hiding places, surrounded the outlaws and dragged them from their saddles. In less than two minutes, the gang was lined up, their arms roped behind their backs. But the place was a shambles, with those eight bodies lying stark in the moonlight and dying horses breathing their last.

It was then that young Tony, whom Shorty had sent to Marfa to get the sheriff, came tearing up with Sheriff Hale and a big posse. The peace officer, tall, grey-haired, with

hawklike nose and penetrating grey eyes, eyed the scene grimly, listening as Shorty Welch and the other Star-M riders told the story of the fight.

"But—Miss Jessie, Shorty?" he finally asked. "Ain't nobody seen no trace o' her yit?"

"Not a one, Hale," Shorty replied bitterly. And then he related the story of their finding Jim Holt and old McCoy dead and Buck's being caught with his guns out. "Took us tuh a ravine just north o' here, Hale, sayin' he'd left Miss Jessie there, but she warn't. Then he dumped me an' skinned out, yellin' back tuh look fer her hoss' trail—left front shoe missin'. Claimed he war Buck Bonner, what none of us knows 'cept Jim Holt, an' Jim war dead inside th' ranch. Told us a durned yarn 'bout how him an' Miss Jessie'd had a fight with a bunch o' outlaws up near them Alamitos ruins an' had killed three of 'em an' skinned out fer th' ranch." He snorted in disgust. "He shore took us all in."

The sheriff eyed him keenly. "Shorty," he said, "mebbe you fellas has pulled a boner. There are three dead outlaws back there. We runs ontuh them on our way down here. All renegades whose pictures is on police posters all over this ol' Big Bend. Ef that fella was really Buck Bonner—"

"Then we've shore been a pack o' fools, Hale," Shorty Welch admitted, "an' me th' biggest. Ef he's really Buck Bonner an' out trailin' Miss Jessie all by hisself, God help 'im! We'd oughta git out ag'in right away, an' search till hell freezes over."

"We cain't start too fast, Shorty," Hale agreed. "Everybody git a fresh hoss, quick. We'll scour these old Hell's Million Acres foot by foot. Let's git started, an' Gawd help Miss Jessie ef we don't find her!"

Within five minutes, all were mounted on fresh horses taken from the Star-M's remuda. Leaving half a dozen men to guard the prisoners and the ranch, Hale led the rest away towards the eastern hills at a swinging gallop. As they neared the mountain, an hour later, the first signs of dawn were breaking over the pinnacled peaks beyond.

"Thank Gawd we'll have daylight now," Hale said. "Trailin' through this country at night's shore—"

But he cut short his words, jerking to a swift halt and staring away in the direction of the Alamitos ruins.

"Look, fellas!" he shouted loudly. "Smoke! Mebbe it's a signal. Come on, an' rake yore broncs hard!"

CHAPTER VIII

Showdown

WHILE at the Alamitos ruins, beside the hole Buck had made in the rotten old shingle roof, he and Jessie lay side by side, listening as the crackling flames caught more and more of the brush against the front of the old building. Smoke began coming up chokingly.

At Buck's words, "I'm gonna take another look," Jessie caught his arms tightly as he started to rise. Her blue eyes filled with new dread.

"But they'll kill you, Buck, the instant you show yourself," she cried. "They're watching for us, knowing we're cornered."

But Buck was already tearing at the old shingles, making the hole larger, with as little noise as possible. Fortunately, the roar of the flames below, around the old porch, and the activity of the gang in dragging up more and more dry brush, under Mort Ringer's shouting commands, prevented the slight noise made by Buck from reaching the

ears of the men below. Soon he had a good-sized opening before him. Then he shoved his body upward and poked his head through.

Mort Ringer was standing just below him, near the wall of the house, watching the small porch blaze. The other outlaws were moving back and forth along the wall, carrying more brush. Suddenly a wild plan flashed into Buck's head. He dropped back beside Jessie.

"Yuh said there was some lariats up here, on some saddles yuh found. Quick, git 'em, while I watch!"

Crawling back in the inky darkness to where she had found the rifles, the boxes of ammunition and those saddles, Jessie untied two lariats from saddle horns and crept back beside Buck, held out the ropes to him. He took one—a strong rawhide lariat that would hold an ox.

In the dim light of the coming dawn, Jessie watched him tensely, wonderingly.

"What—how—?" she began. "It won't work, Buck. We can't climb down a rope, now, with all those flames below. It—it's madness to think we can. And they'd shoot us down."

A grim chuckle came from Buck as, holding the loop he had made in the lariat in his hands, he rose again to his knees and started shoving his head and shoulders and arms up through the opening he had made.

"We ain't crawlin' down no rope, Jessie," he whispered. "But if I'm lucky, we'll be havin' a guest right *pronto*. Watch that trap door over th' ladder an' take my guns with yuh. Shoot if yuh sees anybody comin' up."

Then he had head, shoulders, arms and lariat out of the opening, his legs hanging down inside the attic. Mort Ringer was still standing below, watching his men throw more brush on the fire. As yet, the flames had not reached halfway up the side of the wall, but it would only be a few more seconds before they would. Leaning forward, Buck suddenly dropped his loop straight down over Mort Ringer's shoulders and jerked the lariat tight with all his strength. The loop snapped about the outlaw chief's arms, pinning them to his sides. Instantly, Buck dropped back inside the attic and started hauling on the rope with all his powerful strength.

A WILD yell came from Mort Ringer as he felt himself jerked upward. His legs started kicking ridiculously, seeking a f o o t h o l d against the adobe wall. His hands were helpless because both arms were inside the searingly tight loop. The men below yelled wildly, but there was nothing they could do. Their chief was too high above them and going higher every instant; and they had nothing to shoot at. They leaped about, shouting advice to Ringer to do this and that. But a heavy man swinging in a loop at the end of a rawhide lariat, his arms pinioned to his sides, can do little except kick with his legs—a useless act when against an adobe wall.

And then Buck had Ringer almost with his head against the edge of the roof. There he held him swinging back and forth as the outlaw kept kicking and cursing.

"Now, Ringer," he said grimly, hoarsely, "kick all yuh please, but unless yuh tell yore men tuh put out that fire, they'll be three of us rompin' straight intuh hell soon's them flames gits up here. How about it?"

"Put out that fire, quick!" Ringer screamed down at his men. "Put it out, for God's sake!"

The outlaws, shouting raucous nothings, went madly to work dragging away the burning brush. Then they stamped about on the burning old boards of the small porch, rip-

ping out any timbers which were still ablaze.

Buck pulled Ringer higher, until the outlaw's head and shoulders were above the edge of the roof. Then he reached down, jerked out Ringer's two six-guns and tossed them away. Straining in every muscle as he held Ringer there, he spoke sharply to Jessie.

"I'm draggin' 'im in here, Jessie," he said, though he could not see her in the pitch blackness of the attic. "Keep watchin' that traphole in th' floor, an' if any of 'em tries comin' up, let 'em have it fast. I'll have 'im roped quick."

"I'm on the job, Buck," Jessie's steady voice came back to him. "I'm holding your guns loaded to the muzzle. I'm going down now, and hold them all outside! None has come in yet," she added.

"No—no, Jessie!" he cried. "Wait! They'll git yuh before yuh're halfway down!"

But he heard her riding boots on the ladder. Tensely he waited, holding Mort Ringer swinging just below the opening in the roof. For a long few seconds he heard her as she went down, and then her voice sounded, loud and curt:

"Put up your hands, you men, and keep 'em there! *And don't move!*"

Flooded with swift anxiety for her safety, Buck gripped the rawhide lariat and dragged Ringer through the opening in two mighty heaves. Both fell flat on the rotten old floor of the attic. But in that flashing instant, before Buck could recover, the outlaw chief ripped off the lariat and was at him like a cornered bear. Their bodies met with a thud. Instantly, they became a mass of flying legs, of smashing fists, of whirling black forms crashing here and there over the old flooring of the attic. As they fought, it sagged under their weight, creaking with the dryrot of age. They rolled towards the opening above the ladder.

Their feet gouged and flung about. A battle to the death, as each man knew grimly; they fought in silence.

Suddenly, in a quick turn, Buck was on top. Ringer, larger, heavier, rolled him aside, then made a catlike plunge and gained the upper position. Buck drew up both knees and kicked with all his might. Ringer grunted, loosened his grip for an instant. Buck leaped at him, bore him flat again, gripped his throat.

BUT that fall brought dire, unexpected results. With a loud crash, the ancient floor gave way. Both men, with Buck on top, went headlong to the floor of the room below. They struck with tremendous force, but Buck was saved the jolt by being on top. For an instant, they lay there motionless.

Then Buck realized that the outlaw was not moving. He got up and stood breathing heavily, staring down at Ringer and keeping both hands extended for action.

But Mort Ringer made no move. Buck stared into the outlaw's blood-smeared face, listened for breathing. The great chest lay still. Buck reached down warily, expecting some trick. He moved Ringer's head. It flopped sideways, grotesquely. Buck rose with a harsh gasp.

"Neck busted!" he exclaimed grimly. "Dead!"

Straightening, drawing in deep breaths after the terrific fight, he gazed around. His legs felt trembly, his sight strangely dim. With a violent effort, he shook the feeling off, widened his feet and then gave another gasp of surprise.

Jessie was standing just inside the door, at one side, a gun in each hand, and holding them steadily pointing at five scowling outlaws outside, whose hands were raised above their heads!

In one leap Buck was beside her,

He reached over her shoulders and took his guns.

"Reckon I'll take back my guns now, Jessie," he said coolly, regaining his breath and his strength. He stepped outside, guns ready. "Git me them lariats again, will yuh?" Both muzzles holding towards the outlaws, he smiled grimly through the smeared blood on his face. "Hold steady, you *hombres*. Keep ticklin' th' sky 'less yuh wants some more gunplay. It's *my* time tuh howl, now."

A moment more and Jessie was beside him, the two lariats in her hands. Buck motioned one gun slightly and eyed the outlaws sternly.

"Turn yore backs, *pronto!*" he ordered. And the men turned, their hands still well above their heads. "Git their guns, Jessie," Buck said. "Toss 'em back here tuh me."

Moving swiftly behind the outlaws, Jessie took away every gun and flung all back towards the doorway. Her blue eyes were shining, her movements quick, lithe.

"An' now tie their hands behind 'em," Buck told her. "Shove yore paws behind yuh, you *hombres*, quick!"

After she had tied each man, Buck strode forward and tested each knot, jerking many tighter until the men grunted their fury.

"An' now I reckon we'll take these fellas up tuh town, Jessie," he said. "Will yuh bring our broncs? Blaze an' that black stallion must shore be gittin' hungry—an' so are we." His eyes twinkled into hers.

As Jessie led the two horses up, Buck took off a saddle and bridle from an outlaw's horse and put it on the stallion. Then, with Jessie riding Blaze and he the black, he spoke curtly to the outlaws—a scowling, dirty bunch of renegades and, if Buck had known of the fight over on the Star-M, the last of the Mort Ringer gang.

"Git movin', *hombres!*" he ordered. "An' head north for Marfa."

But as the prisoners moved out, Jessie looked at Buck anxiously.

"Can't we go by home on our way, Buck?" she asked, a little quiver now in her voice and her eyes misty. "I can't leave Dad lying there—"

BUT Buck shook his head. He believed that other part of the gang had probably reached the Star-M long hours ago and had, in all likelihood, burned it to the ground. There would be nothing for her to see there but cold ashes. Even the Star-M riders had probably ridden all night among the hills, searching for her—and for him as the killer of old Jim Holt and her father.

"Reckon we better not," he replied. "We'll git these *hombres* up tuh th' sheriff first. Then I'll ride down an' take—"

He broke off abruptly, staring away westward, in the direction of the Star-M. In a cloud of dust, a strong body of horsemen was sweeping forward at a run. Instantly, he judged them to be that part of the Ringer gang that had ridden to destroy Jessie's home. Whipping out one gun, he halted his prisoners and spoke sharply:

"Head back for them Alamitos ruins, you men, quick! If them's yore pals, come tuh rescue yuh, I'm holdin' yuh there as targets for their bullets till hell freezes over. Go on, git movin', take up a trot, or I'll shore burn yuh down!"

Riding behind their prisoners, Buck and Jessie reached the old ruins and, leaping from their saddles, drove the men inside. Then Buck stationed two prisoners in the open doorway and others in the window openings, their arms still roped tightly behind their backs.

"If yore friends wants tuh shoot now," Buck told them, "you skunks'll shore know how it feels tuh be holed

up against outlaws an' trying tuh stop hot lead—a dose o' yore own medicine." Then he turned to Jessie. "Grab them rifles an' cartridges what's up in th' loft, will yuh? Them *hombres* is comin' too fast for me tuh stop watchin' 'em. Looks like we'll be needin' every darned one o' them rifles—an' soon."

As Jessie scuttled up the ladder, Buck watched from a window. A mile away yet, the horsemen were coming at running speed, in a cloud of dust.

"Guess they seen that smoke o' th' fire," he muttered, "an' this is one o' their old hangouts at times. Hurry, Jessie," he called. "They're shore comin' fast, an' a slew of 'em."

She passed down the rifles and cartridge boxes to him from the opening above the ladder, and then climbed down beside him. They swiftly loaded every weapon. Buck leaned the rifles against a wall and opened up some cartridge boxes.

"Looks like yuh'll have tuh do a heap o' fast loadin' for me, Jessie, after all," he grinned.

SUDDENLY one of the prisoners at a window yelled and leaped back, his face filled with fright.

"Them ain't our fellas!" he shouted hoarsely. "Them's th' Star-M men, an' a posse. Th' big fella wearin' th' black hat's Sheriff Hale o' Marfa!"

At his words, the other prisoners, their arms still roped behind their backs, plunged away from the door and windows and threw themselves flat on the floor, out of range of the riders outside. A cry of relief burst from Jessie's lips. Beside Buck, she clung to his arm.

"Thank God!" he muttered hoarsely. His arm, where that old bullet had seared the flesh, was aching badly. The wound in his shoulder felt as though a bulldog were hanging from it by the teeth; and his face and ribs, from Mort Ringer's blows up in the loft, were aching all over. From a gash over his left eye, where Ringer's fist had torn the skin, a trickle of blood was slipping down one cheek. His shirt hung in rags.

As the prisoners darted away from the door and windows, he leaped to the doorway. Jessie was beside him in a second. As they saw Buck and Jessie, the riders yelled and sent their horses racing faster. Those in the lead whipped up their guns. Buck grinned.

"They've seen me," he said, with a chuckle. "They think I killed yore father an' old Jim Holt, an' that I kidnaped yuh. Reckon it's yore turn tuh explain things to 'em now."

Swiftly he told her what had occurred after he had left her back in the ravine near the Star-M.

"Here they are," he added, "an' unless I miss my guess, there'll be about forty six-guns pointin' straight at my stomach in just one half minute more."

For answer, Jessie stepped outside. Then she smiled back at him and held out one hand.

"Come here, cowboy!" she said softly, her eyes shining. "I've never made love in public, but I can if I have to."

He stepped beside her, and suddenly she put her arms around his shoulders and laid her face against his breast. And in that position she smiled up at the Star-M riders and Sheriff Hale's posse as they jerked to sliding halts before her.

"Just in time, boys," she told them as they stared, their six-guns held ready for action against Buck. "Meet my future husband, Buck Bonner. If you're after Mort Ringer and his gang, you'll find him and some of them inside. He's dead, and the rest are waiting for you to take 'em to jail."

Old Sheriff Hale stared at her in utter disbelief. Big Shorty Welch, beside him, seemed speechless.

"Whut—whut—" the sheriff began.

"They tried burning us out here," Jessie told him, "but Buck knew a trick that worked." Then, as they leaped from their horses and crowded around, she told the story.

As she finished, big Shorty Welch stepped forward and faced Buck sheepishly, held out one huge hand and grinned.

"Ef we Star-M *hombres* kin ever make it up tuh yuh, Bonner," he said, as their hands met, "jest say th' word, any time an' any place. Us fellas ain't much as bridesmaids, but we'll shore do our best. All we asks is that yuh an' Miss Jessie make it *pronto*, an' right on th' home ranch."

"And how is the ranch, Shorty?" Buck asked, wondering what had become of those outlaws Mort Ringer had told to burn it down.

"Fine and dandy, Bonner," Shorty laughed, "but it's shore been a right excitin' night." And he told the story of the attack on the Star-M.

"And—and—Dad, Shorty?" Jessie asked, her voice husky with emotion.

Shorty's honest eyes dropped. "I—I reckon yore dad died fightin', Miss Jessie," he said. "Him an' Jim Holt was layin' side by side, still holdin' their guns, with a pile o' empty shells around 'em."

A proud light came into Jessie's tear-filled eyes. She clasped her hands about Buck's arm and lifted her head, though her eyes now brimmed over. Buck laid his hand on hers and patted it gently.

"Dad was a McCoy, boys!" Jessie said. "He couldn't have gone—any other way. The Star-M will carry on, as Dad would have wished." Then she looked up into Buck's face and smiled wanly. "Take me home now, Buck."

He lifted her to his saddle on his pinto, then mounted the black. As they turned to ride away, the sheriff spoke:

"Come up tuh town soon, Bonner. Them rewards'll be waitin'—most ten thousand dollars." As Buck smiled back and nodded, Hale suddenly lifted his big Stetson high. His eyes shone with the admiration that one brave man feels for another. "Boys," he shouted to the men about him, "I vote us Big Bend buckaroos elect Buck Bonner a new member here an' now. I've saw a heap o' fightin' men in my time, but none better!"

Hats flew into the air amid shouts of approval. Buck grinned down at the friendly faces about him.

"I've heard a lot about you Big Bend buckaroos, fellows," he said proudly, "an' I'm shore expecting to enjoy being one o' the outfit!"

Next Month's Novel: RANGER BULLETS, by A. Leslie

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One Hand *Too* Many

Two death streaks leaped through the air

Peaceful Big Bend Baker Did His Best to Avoid Trouble —Only to Have It Land Plumb in His Lap

By SYL MacDOWELL

Author of "Gunslinger's Pay," "Too Much Liberty," etc.

THE saloon at Los Coches was crowded that night, and most of the customers were discussing the poster that "Snakeye" Smith, the bartender, has pasted on the back-mirror. The poster had arrived on the afternoon mail stage from the U. S. Marshal's Office at Salida. In big, red letters it proclaimed:

$1000 REWARD

Dead or Alive, is offered for the capture of one *El Conjuro*, rustler and killer, believed headed for Los Coches County with

a band of five bad *hombres* also wanted here.

"Big Bend" Baker, his bony elbows propped cautiously around a beer glass, eyed the tempting offer longingly. Big Bend was a humble line rider for the Stovepipe outfit, but he had ambitions. He craved to run his own brand, and that thousand would start him off fine.

But of all that loud, hard crowd in Snakeye's place, Big Bend was one least likely to collect it. Six feet seven, and thin as a snow winter steer, he had the mild, faded eye of a man overfond of peace. His hayrake shoulders stooped in perpetual apology. He was a beer drinker in a whiskey crowd.

He was aware of a rasping, crow-caw voice at his left, as a short, burly man bellied up to the bar, jostling Big Bend roughly and nearly upsetting his beer.

"Daggone puny community, Los Coches is!" the newcomer proclaimed. "Most boggle-eyed, rubbery-kneed citizens I ever did see! Reckon that's why *El Conjuro* figgered tuh come here! Nobody nervy enough tuh poke tin over a rathole!"

"How about yuh, stranger?" somebody drawled.

"Me, I snub-tied better men that *El Conjuro* in my day! Hell, yes! Why, on my *pasear* over from Ash Forks, I rode onto a roundup camp. Eight-ten buckaroos settin' around a fire, drinkin' cawfee. I asks, 'Who's boss here?' Nobody answers, so I git off my hawse, take a look around, then set down on a barrel-head cactus. Again I asks, 'Who's boss here?'

"Nobody speaks up, so I reaches over and grabs the pot o' boilin' cawfee off the fire. No cup, so I proceeds to drink it empty out o' the spout. The pot, it was sort of hot, so I reaches down a hole and drags out a rattlesnake, which I wrap around the handle. I set the pot back on the fire, and for the third time I inquires, 'Who's boss here?' And then a jigger in a squeaky voice rises up and declares, 'I was, mister. But you *is*!'"

BIG BEND turned and stared curiously at the braggart. Some dusty saddle bum he'd never seen before. The stranger's left sleeve, Big Bend observed, was fastened to the side of his shirt with a blanket pin. An empty sleeve.

"Say now, on account o' yuh havin' only one arm, how could yuh drag a snake out o' that hole when yuh already was holdin' a hot coffee pot, huh?" Big Bend asked, inoffensively.

Someone laughed. The little man spun around, suddenly furious.

"Why, yuh slab-sided, stilt-legged gopher crane, yuh aim tuh call me a liar?"

"Shucks, no!" sputtered Big Bend. "I—I just—"

A bunch of knuckles, cracking against his stubbly jaw, broke his answer short. He staggered and grabbed the bar for support. He raised a hand to his surprised face. The little man struck again, his fist thudding into Big Bend's stomach. Big Bend grabbed for his middle.

"When 'Flash' Faraday gives information, he don't admire tuh be snickered at, savvy?" yelped the one-armed man.

A roar of laughter greeted this. Big Bend made a ludicrous picture. He reddened like a turkey gobbler.

"If yuh had two hands, Faraday, I'd likely git good an' mad!" was his mild rebuke.

The stranger who called himself Flash Faraday pushed the crowd away from him. He stepped into a cleared space, slamming his hat on the bar, and faced Big Bend, his one fist working like a piston.

"Me, I can whittle yuh down as is!" he cried. "So git mad, daggone yuh!"

Big Bend's jaw sported a rising lump, and his middle felt like a wagon wheel had run over it. His big hands closed into hard-knobbed fists, then opened again. He backed away, shaking his head.

"When I fuss, I fuss big," he muttered. "Yuh pulled that snake out with yore little finger, for all I care."

The crowd hooted with vast enjoyment. They gave Big Bend no credit for refusing to fight a smaller man, a cripple. All they saw was an awkward giant avoiding encounter with the quarrelsome, loud-talking Flash Faraday.

Big Bend retreated in confusion. He left Snakeye's place, derisive yells following him. He heard his beer glass crash against the swinging doors as he departed. It was Flash Faraday's final gesture of scornful defiance.

It was a long and lonely ride back to the Stovepipe ranch. Big Bend, bent like a human question mark in his saddle, reflected unhappily on the meanness of a world from which he asked so little— Only a chance to start an outfit of his own and settle down in peace.

THE news of his drubbing reached the Stovepipe next morning, whereupon everybody from Hank Weaver, the boss, down to Chow Lee, the Chinese cook, inflicted new misery on his wounded spirit. Big Bend was glad to escape his tormentors when Weaver ordered him, at noon, to make *pasear* for the south boundary of the Stovepipe on a fence-repairing expedition.

Fence-mending was a menial and lonely job that more spirited cowhands scorned and avoided. But Big Bend went willingly; he found the wide solitude of the mesaland a balm and much-needed relief. He rode a hay-bellied red horse that was glad, too, for Big Bend seldom used the spurs on his long and dangling legs.

It was around twenty miles to the south boundary. Big Bend figured to reach Buttonwillow camp well after dark. There was a spring at Buttonwillow and tanks; a cut-out pen used only at branding time and a small shack deserted between roundups, except for the occasional visit of a line rider or random travelers who chose to make use of its shelter.

In saddlebags on Big Bend's cantle were staples, a hammer, fence pliers and two days' rations. He wore no gun. Other Stovepipe riders did. But Big Bend had never shot at anything bigger than a yearling buck. You couldn't mend fences with a .45. And if he needed meat, a bag of beef jerky always hung from the rafters of the Buttonwillow shack.

He crossed a piñon ridge at dark and descended a long draw as a rising moon sent a lacy pattern on the narrow trail. An owl hooted dismally from the ghostly branches of a dead tree. A coyote yipped shrill and long from a rocky slope above, and its cry was taken up by its marauding mate somewhere beyond.

Once a sinister, slinking shadow leaped close ahead, and the greenish glow of a panther's eyes flashed toward the lone rider. The red horse snorted and tried to bolt up a rock slide. But Big Bend reined the animal on toward their destination, gently talking it out of its fears.

These vague alarms of the night disturbed him not at all. He found the wilderness more peaceful than the habitats of men.

He came out of the long draw onto a moon-bathed sage meadow and reached the Buttonwillow cut-out corral. He unsaddled the red horse and rope-hobbled it. He shouldered his saddlebags and started for the shack.

Once, while he was unsaddling, Big Bend thought he noticed a faint whiff of cigarette smoke in the dry,

cool night air. But he rid his mind of the notion. Though, in that arid atmosphere, smoke scent often carried surprising distances, he figured that the tobacco reek of Snakeye's saloon still lingered in his nostrils, just as memory of the painful event of the night before still rankled in his bosom.

BUT as he rounded the circular, pole-built corral, he halted in surprise as he saw a gleam of light at the open window at one end of the shack. That some wayfarer would be here was not too unusual. But there had been no sign of horses in the corral. And had there been mounts staked out or hobbled anywhere in the meadow, the bright moonlight would have allowed Big Bend's accustomed eyes to notice them.

He paused for a moment. Then across the space between shack and corral came the low mumble of voices, terminating in a sudden burst of rough laughter. Big Bend turned, then walking noiselessly as possible through the low, dry grass he made toward the shack indirectly, so as to see the occupants through that open window before he made his presence known.

His caution rose from the swift, uncomfortable recollection that two seasons before a Stovepipe line rider had been murdered at Buttonwillow when he stumbled onto a band of rustlers. There were times even yet when Weaver's range tallies pointed toward unaccountable losses.

This was wild, rugged country, closer to the Mexican Border than to the home spread. Renegades roamed unafraid here where the arm of the law seldom reached. Now and then out of Mexico came beef with brands blanketing old scars that suspiciously resembled the Stovepipe iron. Desert winds quickly effaced trail sign. Whispered rumors from Mañanaland had it that more men rode the Stovepipe than were on Hank Weaver's payroll.

Big Bend reached a spot, a rope-throw from the shack, where he could see inside.

At a crude table sat four men playing cards by the light of a single candle. A fifth sat in the window, smoke from his cigarette floating past his shoulder as he watched the players.

"A mighty tough little *hombre*, yuh bet," Big Bend heard the man in the window say. "Says once he drove a team o' bobcats hitched to a buckboard. Had 'em broke to everything but the bit, so to guide 'em he reached out an' twisted their ears."

A guffaw of laughter came from the card players.

"Smart and tough both, is *Senor El Conjuro,*" one of them spoke up. "*Quien sabe,* he weel collec' the bounty on 'is own hide, who knows?"

"A thousand easier made than foggin' Stovepipe steers through the cactus," declared another. "We're playin' the small end, looks tuh me."

"I favor gittin' up the hawses from below an' dustin' out o' these parts tomorra," growled a bearded man at the far end of the table. "The Sonora climate is healthier for us with the Tucson marshal on the prod like he is!"

A discussion broke out, then, that delayed the cards. But Big Bend strained himself no longer to listen. He had heard enough already to send crawls rippling along his backbone. He thought of turning back to the corral, catching up the red horse, screwing on the saddle and hitting back for the home ranch.

He could reach there with his warning by daylight. A Stovepipe posse could take the trail for Buttonwillow—enough armed men to overpower and capture this band, and to collect honor and possible reward

for turning them over to the U. S. Marshal.

He was making a cautious return to the corral when it struck him with unpleasant force that his danger would be no less in spreading the alarm of these owl-hooters' presence. With *El Conjuro* at large, he would be a marked man. And Border renegades had ugly ways of exacting revenge. Big Bend recalled one diabolical detail of that murdered line rider: his killers had sent the man's ears to Weaver.

Big Bend was convinced that *El Conjuro* was the one-armed man who called himself Flash Faraday. There was a telling similarity in that tale of the bobcat team to Faraday's whopper about the cactus seat, the hot coffee pot and the rattlesnake.

For a long moment of indecision, Big Bend halted. At length, with a grim determination, he put his back to the corral and started back for the shack. As he went, he drew the hammer from the saddlebags draped over his shoulder.

He crawled the last few feet to the window. The arguing outlaw still sat there, his kerchief fluttering in a light breeze. Big Bend gripped the hammer and steeled himself to strike.

He could not force himself to the act. He had never hit any man, not even with his fist. This bloody, stealthy violence, even in so desperate a situation, was impossible.

The kerchief, a wide-patterned Mexican *reboso*, light and silken, rippled again in the draught that swept through the window. Big Bend, apprehensive to every movement, glued his eyes on it. Then came an idea.

He dipped a hand into the saddlebags, drew out a heavy fence staple, and came silently to full height. He grasped the loose, pointed end of the kerchief at the desperado's back. He pressed it to the window frame, and aiming carefully with the hammer, gave the staple one hard, resounding whack.

At that sharp, alarming sound every man in the room leaped to his feet. The one seated in the window gasped a harsh oath that ended in a croak as the kerchief tightened, jerking him back.

Big Bend pressed the cold steel of the hammer against the man's back.

"Just set," he commanded. "And paw for the moon."

The man's hands shot up. At the end of the table the bearded ruffian blinked. With a sudden swoop he knocked the candle to the floor.

THERE was a yell and a rush for the door. Leaving his captive, Big Bend galloped around the shack and met the rush as the door flew open on its bullhide hinges.

The foremost man sent a shot ahead of him as he came. The stab of flame from the muzzle scorched Big Bend's cheek, and the roar stunned and half deafened him. Instinctively he struck out. The hammer landed on some part of the gunman's skull with a sickening crack. He dropped, the force of his rush sending him to the ground on his face.

Another roar blasted straight for Big Bend's heart. But the saddlebags, swung at his shoulder, saved him. The well-aimed slug smashed into the staples. Big Bend, towering like Thor over his would-be murderer, smashed down with his hammer. The effect was gruesome. He fairly drove this second antagonist into the ground.

A third one aimed, and Big Bend flung the saddlebags in his face, taking advantage of this act of strategy by whacking out at the fourth man, who went to his knees with a blurted scream, his face a crimson spread.

Hot lead ripped Big Bend's sleeve, searing his arm from wrist to elbow as he smote and shattered the gun

hand of his surviving enemy. Big Bend dropped to his knees and groped for the fallen six-gun.

He touched it as its owner pounced on his back, clawing for his throat. Big Bend rose, throwing the man from him, at the same time swinging the gun barrel. It hit his attacker's shoulder, and bone splintered loudly.

The man in the window had ripped the kerchief from his neck. Big Bend's warning was three rapid reports from the corner of the shack. One of the slugs tugged at his shirt. If Big Bend had been a few inches wider, it would have dropped him. He fired blindly, in return. Splinters whizzed from a corner of the shack. The head and arm of the lone avenger vanished.

Big Bend leaped recklessly. Then followed a strange pursuit, a fierce and breathless duel in which they chased each other, first one way, then back, around the shack.

The outlaw was lightning-quick, and Big Bend was clumsy with a gun. He fired twice, missing. Two death streaks leaped at him, and one gouged him across the left breast. Between the pounding explosions from the .45s, tense, deathly silence lay over the meadow, as though wild things of the night waited, listening.

BIG BEND had dropped the saddlebags. But he still gripped the hammer in his left hand. He clung to it with unconscious tenacity. It was a tool to which he was more accustomed than the revolver.

He drove two more bullets at his dodging enemy. They whizzed off harmlessly into the dark. He fired again, trying to send lead through a corner of the shack. The next time he pulled the trigger there was an ominous snap. His captured weapon was empty, useless now. A warm trickle spread from the pounding pain of his wound.

Big Bend's opponent in this deadly game of hide and seek must have heard the click of the hammer on an empty cartridge, for he grew suddenly bold. Running rapidly, he circled and came around at Big Bend's back, as the cowboy crouched, peering around a rear angle of the shack.

Big Bend heard him. He spun around in the muzzle of the gun. He flung the hammer as a finger of fire jabbed from the gun. A paralyzing blow on the outer muscle of his thigh dropped him. But the hammer struck with a sickening, hollow thump. Big Bend's last opponent gulped, grabbed the region of his belt, and sat down jarringly.

Big Bend pushed himself up and went for the downed man. It became a hand-to-hand struggle now for the possession of the rustler's gun.

This man, whose bulky body had blotted the candlelight of the window, fought with the primitive ferocity of a wounded mountain cat. He knew the vicious, treacherous tricks of rough and tumble. In Border brothels he had learned brutish brawling. But never had he locked in death-grips with such a wild, threshing tangle of arms and legs as this six-feet-seven of whang-leather cowboy.

Big Bend, punished by the knees and fists and spurs of the fighting outlaw, released all the fury that for a lifetime he had stifled and denied. His ramrod arms smashed past the other's guard. They rolled, grappling, came to their feet, grappled and fell again.

The outlaw's breath came in tortured, wheezing gasps. Long since his gun had been knocked into the grass. He was weakening. But Big Bend's new-found fighting power seemed to expand. To his own complete amazement, he became aware of a strange, savage joy in this physical, spiritual release. Even the pain of

gouging and kicks was somehow exquisite, firing him with that ancient fervor of battle.

He was unconquerable, and the gods that watch over fighting men whispered this mysterious assurance. Fear had fled. Lean and hard and reckless, he battered the face and body of that thick-bodied man with big-boned knuckles that were only beginning to learn their amazing offensive power.

No man could stand up to such an onslaught. By accident, rather than through any skill, Big Bend's fist found the other's hard jaw. The impact was like a revolver shot. The outlaw went down like a wet sack.

Ripped and bleeding, his shirt a sodden thing of rags, Big Bend swayed above the beaten one. Under the white light of the moon he stood, half-naked to the waist, exultant and mysteriously joyous. This carnage about him seemed an old and familiar thing. Phantoms of frontier ancestors seemed to be at Big Bend's shoulder. Voices long dead seemed to be approving his triumph.

The whipped thing at his feet stirred and blubbered brokenly. Big Bend reached down, gripped a limp arm, and started for the corral, dragging his captive. He bound him to the side of the corral with his lariat. Then he caught up the red horse, clamped on the saddle and rode away.

IT was sunup when Big Bend Baker returned to the Stovepipe. He swaggered into the cookshack where the outfit sat at breakfast. Their eyes bulged at the barbarous spectacle, blood-caked, bruised and ragged. He was an object both horrible and ludicrous. One waddy unwisely laughed.

"For the love o' snakes, who whopped yuh this time?" he cackled. "Or did yuh meet up with a she-bear?"

Big Bend swept out with a great paw, slapping his would-be tormentor from the bench. He stepped across the fallen, astonished waddy to the stove. The Chink cook gave a sudden squeal of terror and reached for a huge carving knife. Big Bend emitted a rumble, seized the terrified cook by neck and pants seat and hurled him toward the door, speeding his departure with a terrific kick. He picked up the knife and dropped it into the stove.

A coffee pot sat on the warming rack. Big Bend grabbed it and raised the spout to his lips. It was pleasantly warm. He drank deep, then threw the pot after the cook.

Weaver chose that untimely instant to appear in the doorway. The pot struck him squarely on the chest. Hot grounds slopped up in his face.

The stunned outfit were scrambling up from the table. Knocking them aside like tenpins, Big Bend strode to the door.

"Git these jiggers intuh leather an' head for Buttonwillow," he told the Stovepipe boss. "And take along a diggin' shovel, cause there's some buryin' tuh do."

He walked on toward the droop-hipped red horse. Weaver swabbed coffee grounds off his face.

"Hey, where yuh headin'?" he squawked. "Yuh—"

"Don't agitate him, Hank, he's gone plumb loco!" gasped one of the riders. "Just let him go an' be dang thankful!"

Big Bend went. He only paused to shout back to Hank Weaver to get some other squinch-eyed pilgrim to ride fence and chore around for him, that he was through on the Stovepipe.

Something like an hour later, Big Bend reached Los Coches. He flipped his tie-rope over the rail in front of Snakeye's and went into the saloon. Snakeye greeted his appearance with a startled yell.

"Jumpin' Jehosaphat, yuh ride intuh a buzzsaw? Or was there a—a explosion?" he cried.

"No explosion yet," gritted Big Bend. "But there's goin' tuh be! Where at is that little wart Faraday?"

"Front o' the hotel, most likely. Why?"

Big Bend left the saloon. He limped some, for that slug rip in his thigh felt like the jab of a devil's fork. He started down the board walk. The hotel's upper porch extended over the walk a few doors down. In the patch of shade three men sat tilted back in chairs.

Farther off, down where the road entered town, a rider hot-spurred as though in close pursuit of this grim giant and his red horse. But Big Bend did not see him. His eyes were glued at one of the occupants of the three chairs in front of the hotel.

It was the one-armed, bragging Faraday. Even now the little man seemed to be yarning to his companions.

Big Bend made straight for them, his stooped shoulders hunched menacingly. His eyes, glazed now, even failed to note the fact that Faraday wore a gun. With steady and terrible determination Big Bend made toward him. That pool of shade and the man who sat in it were a blot in his vision—a blot in which the one thing distinct was a check from the U. S. marshal's office for one thousand dollars.

THE one-armed man saw what was coming. His one hand went for his hip.

Whatever might have happened in the next few danger-fraught seconds was interrupted by the arrival of the hard-riding horseman. He reined to a rearing halt, eyes glued on the red horse at the rail. They turned to Big Bend, lurching toward the seated Faraday. His gun, a long-barreled Colt, flashed out. A short-legged man, this rider, erect in his saddle as a centaur, with silver-conchoed chaps and an ugly leer on his swarthy face.

Faraday's gun came out. Big Bend saw the yawning chasm of its muzzle. But he kept coming.

"Look out!" Faraday growled.

The gun belched, booming loud under the hotel porch. By a margin of inches a bolt of lead thundered past Big Bend's ear. It came just as the rider, out there in the street, was drawing a bead on Big Bend's turned back.

The rider cried out, gripped his saddlehorn as he swayed forward.

"Damn yuh all and yore blood money!" he bellowed.

His six-gun had wavered, but it came up again. He reined in close to the sidewalk, a few feet from Faraday. Faraday tried to pull again, but his cylinder jammed. His face tensed as realization of his predicament came. He dropped the useless gun and groped upward with that one hand.

Big Bend was forgotten now, both by Faraday and by the swarthy rider. He was a little to one side, close to the edge of the walk. He saw a hate flash of recognition between them.

The stranger with the conchoed chaps, was he trying to get that thousand that Big Bend had come so far to collect? So it seemed. The unfairness of it sent Big Bend into an unreasoning rage. He took a running leap. His lean length cleared the hitch-rail as he catapulted against that swarthy, snarling man in the saddle.

The foam-flecked horse leaped, and the two of them went to the dust. The short-legged man clubbed out with his long-barreled Colt. Big Bend fended off the blows. He jerked the other up by the loose shirtfront and hit twice with his malletlike fist.

The swarthy man lost interest in the world. His hands jerked out, and his short legs went limp. Big Bend flung him onto the edge of the walk. Then the cowboy staggered erect, lurched toward Faraday.

The one-armed man's face was wreathed with the sort of look that doesn't come often to any man's face, the sort of look any man might wear when snatched back from the brink of certain doom. An amazed, numbed gratitude beyond words.

"By all the gods!" he breathed. "Yuh—yuh got him!"

One of the other men, who had leaped from his chair, was kneeling beside the stunned stranger sprawled on the sun-warped planks.

"Conjuro!" he shrilled. "It's—*El Conjuro!"*

Big Bend didn't hear, because just as he reached out to haul the one-armed man out of the chair, the spinning universe darkened, then went black altogether. He folded up at Faraday's feet.

BIG BEND heard the rest of it, however, about an hour later. The Los Coches doctor had patched up his wounds and brought the gaunt giant back to consciousness with a slug of Snakeye's best. Big Bend was outstretched on the bar. He struggled feebly to rise.

"Let me up! I'll—I'll git him!" he raved.

The Los Coches doctor laughed.

"Yuh got him already, feller!"

Big Bend blinked and looked around. He saw Snakeye, a few other Los Coches citizens, and—the one-armed man. He struggled again to rise, but they all were pushing him back on the bar. The man who called himself Faraday peeled off his coat and rolled it under Big Bend's head. As he did so, he bared a shiny badge pinned to his suspenders.

"Who—what—" croaked Big Bend. "Yuh ain't—*El Conjuro?"*

"Don't you savvy who this feller is?" the doctor asked. "Deppity Marshal Faraday, from Tucson! Sure!"

"But," protested Big Bend, "he—"

The little man grinned.

"I come tuh put some spirit in this here owl-eyed community, hopin' I'd rouse up enough warlike enthusiasm tuh end up *El Conjuro's* career. Reckon I did, all right. But the enthusiasm busted out in the *hombre* I least figgered it would. Bendy, old socks, yuh're the scrappin'est war hoss I ever did see!"

Big Bend was a little fuzzy yet in the head.

"Out at Buttonwillow—" he began.

"We know all about that," Flash Faraday said, patting him on the unhurt shoulder. *"El Conjuro* told us. Says yuh cleaned out his camp. He come tuh git the scalp o' the man who done it. Then he sees me settin' there." Faraday's grin melted; bitterness came into his eyes. "Him an' me' we shot it out long while back. Up tuh then I had my two hands, two good gun hands—"

Big Bend was beginning to comprehend. He was learning a lot of new things in a hurry, it seemed. He knew that silent grip of fighting Flash Faraday's on his shoulder meant that the little hornet-eyed deputy was sorry for that bar brawl. It is that way, sometimes, when a hurt man takes out his bitterness on the whole world.

Big Bend's mighty paw crept up and closed over that grip.

"This time," he said *"El Conjuro* met up with too many hands, didn't he, huh, pardner?"

"Pardner?" Faraday repeated softly. "Did yuh say—pardner?"

"Sure!" declared Big Bend. "Yuh an' me—pardners. In a bang-up, two-man cow spread, down yonder below the Buttonwillow. Soon as yuh an' me can collect up that thousand dollar reward, yuh savvy?"

There's a Bang-Up Thrill on Every Page of

Mountain

CHAPTER I

Mile-high Cowboy

THE silver-haired clerk who sat at a desk in the Wells Fargo office was wholly unaware that death hovered near.

Nor did the gold-strike town of Bonanza City realize the near presence of the notorious Denger trio—Curt, and Larn, and Fido. Like hungry wolves planning a bloody foray, those three outlaw brothers sat their mounts on the edge of a rocky hill and studied the town.

Curt Denger was tall, grim, frosty at the temples. He was the eldest, the leader of the bandit trio. Fido was a short, dog-faced man whose barrel-stave legs looked flimsy under his leaden chunk of a body. Larn was a human gorilla—dull-witted, loose-lipped; but despite his blabbing mouth and his shortage of in-

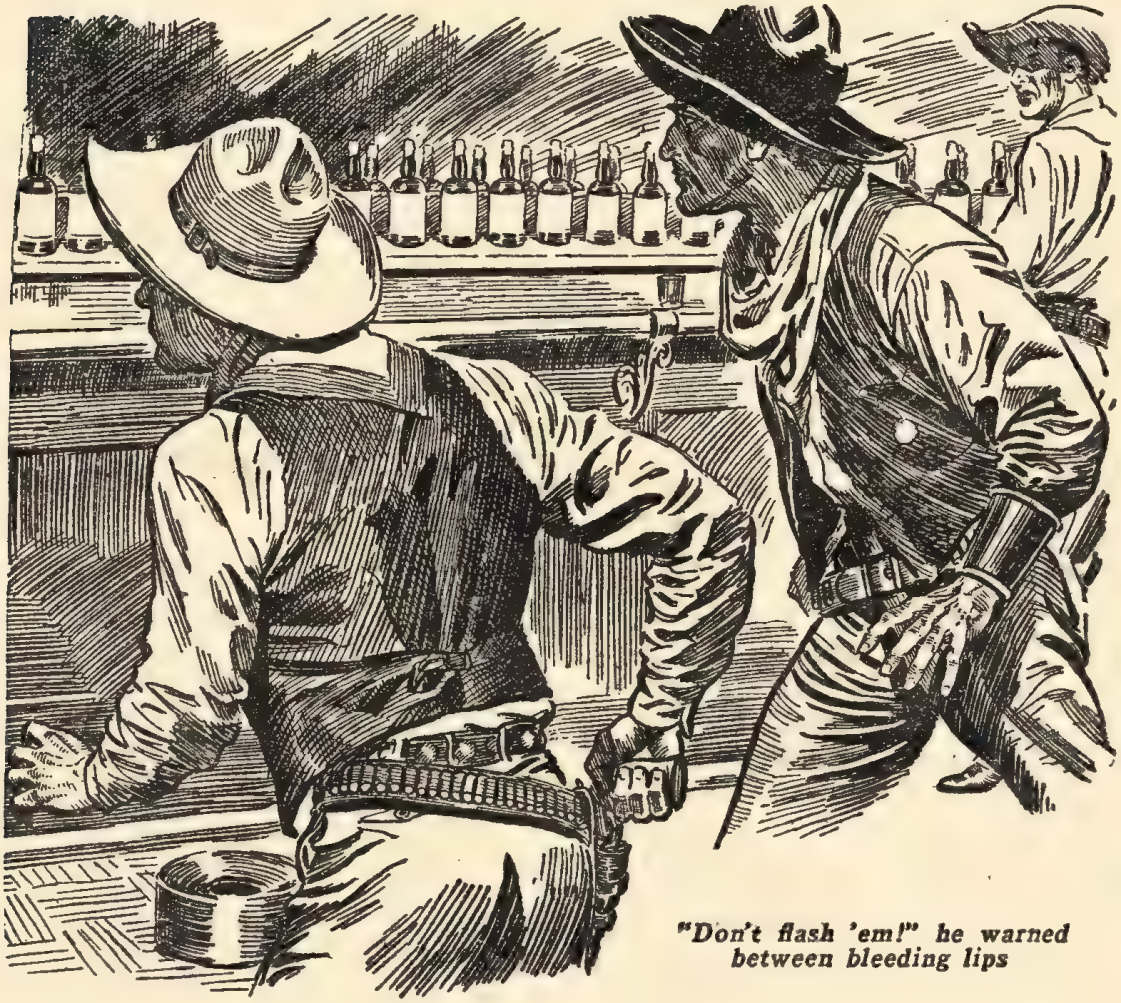
Billy Groat Tracks the Notorious Denger

Waddy

A Complete Novelette

By CLAUDE RISTER

Author of "Land of Missing Men," "Deadly Guns," etc.



"Don't flash 'em!" he warned between bleeding lips

telligence he was a dangerous man. His gun-hand, like those of his two brothers, was as quick and as deadly as a rattler.

They had ridden bloody trails from Mexico to Canada and back several times, those desperadoes. Now they pushed their horses down the rocky slope and entered the unsuspecting town of Bonanza City.

Like the silver-haired express clerk, and the momentarily quiet mining town, cowboy Billy Groat, as he trotted his shaggy mountain bronco along the twisting street of Bonanza City, was wholly unaware that vivid experiences lay immediately in store for him. The Dengers had preceded him by thirty minutes, but he did not know that, either.

Billy made for the Four Aces, chief pleasure resort of the town. Just inside the place he stopped. It was good to be back in civilization—

Outlaw Trio—and Calls a Showdown!

the first time in over three months. He had led a lonely life up at his little Mile-high Ranch.

EMPLOYEES and patrons of the Four Aces looked at the cowboy curiously. He was a chunky young fellow, with square face and frank blue eyes. He wore a battered old Stetson, the brim of which was braced by a rawhide thong laced around the curled edges. In the forepart of the crown was a large snag-hole, and through it stuck a wisp of stiff, tow-colored hair. His denim brush-jumper was faded, threadbare, patched. His old bullhide chaps bore many deep scratches.

"Mountain waddy," remarked a gorilla of a loose-lipped fellow, who sat with two other men at a table near the back of the barroom.

A few patrons laughed. Billy went to the bar.

"Hi, cowboy," the pink-jowled tender said. "Yuh're the waddy who took that no-'count mile-high range up near Whitewater Creek and started up a little spread, ain't yuh?"

"I'm that mountain waddy, all right, but I disagree with yuh about the range being no account," Billy grinned. "She's on the protected side of old Camelback, and grazing and water are plenty. Course, shorthorns and lowland horses wouldn't do good up there, but I'm stocking only with stuff born and brought up in the highlands—mavericks and wild fuzztails. Hunting 'em is like hunting cougars, but I'm slowly getting me an outfit."

"Maybe yuh ought to round up a few mountain goats, too," suggested the swart, loose-mouthed giant at the table in the back of the room.

This time laughter ran all through the crowd.

The cowboy only grinned good-naturedly, a little embarrassedly.

"I ain't got around to that yet," he said.

A tall, stiff-backed man with tight lips and cold eyes, kicked the slope-headed one surreptitiously.

"Keep yore fool mouth shut, Larn!" he ordered. "We don't want to make ourselves conspicuous in this town!"

"That's right, Curt," agreed a dog-faced man who sat on the tall one's left. "We didn't come to Bonanza to get acquainted with her citizens in general."

But the loose-mouthed Larn Denger had already downed considerable liquor; besides, he was pleased that his remarks had twice brought laughter from the crowd. The wedge-headed fellow got up and went across the room, slouched bulkily by the cowboy's side.

"A mile-high mountain ranny, huh?" he said with a grin. "What's yore name, cowboy?"

"Billy Groat; and yore's?"

"Yuh mean Billy Goat! Haw! Haw! That's a good one! Billy Goat, from the rimrocks of the Rockies!"

Again the whole room laughed. Again Billy's square face went red, but this time his grin was thin, rather taut.

"If that big ape don't stop his blabbing he's liable to spoil our whole scheme," Curt Denger said, in a low tone to his dog-faced brother. "Come on, let's haze him out of here."

They got up and started across the room.

"Billy Goat! Haw! Haw! Haw!" Larn was going on. "That calls for a drink. What yuh having, ranny? Goat milk?" He was keeping the crowd guffawing.

Billy's smile was gone now. His face had lost some of its mountain ruddiness.

"Yuh partly called it. Liquor and high altitudes don't agree. I'll have milk, all right; buttermilk—but I'll pay for it myself."

The fat bartender shook his head, causing his pink jowls to shake like jelly.

"No buttermilk, cowboy," he informed.

"Naw, hadn't yuh heard?" Larn put in. "They run out of sour cows last week. Haw! Haw! Haw!"

Curt and Fido had reached the bar.

"Larn," Curt said in a low, warning voice that he masked under the new outburst of laughter.

Then he stopped. Cowboy Billy Groat had wheeled around from the bar. His eyes and his voice were bleak.

"I can takes jokes, especially from people I know, but I don't know yuh, and yuh ain't been joking—just plain insulting," he snapped. "I don't like it, so head yore cayuse in another direction, *hombre*, before yuh ride into trouble."

The mean little black eyes under Larn Denger's receding forehead seemed to draw closer together. The laughter had died instantly.

Even slow-witted Larn Denger realized that the situation had suddenly changed from showoff to showdown.

"Tough, huh?" he sneered. "Smart alec. I was only funnin' and yuh get salty. Why, for two cents, Billy Goat, I'd spur yore ears back."

The mountain waddy sent two fingers darting into a pocket of his faded old brush jumper.

They came out with a pair of pennies.

He clacked them onto the counter; then stood waiting, looking silently, defiantly, into the big fellow's animal eyes.

Larn's hand was called. For just a few seconds he glared dumbly; then with a snarl he swung a hairy fist at the ruddy face. Billy Groat sidestepped lithely. The next instant they were mixing it up—nail, tooth, and claw—and a terrific rough-and-tumble fight was on.

CHAPTER II

House Cleaning

BILLY GROAT was much lighter than his burly opponent, but the mountain waddy was as tough as seasoned cedar and as agile as a bobcat. He chugged a fist to Larn's blunt chin. The blow stopped that bully's rush, and caused him to blink in stupid surprise, but the next instant the big fellow growled and lunged again. Billy stepped forward to meet him. Toe to toe they slugged in furious combat.

Billy quickly found his brain spinning and everything going alternately red and black before his eyes. It seemed that two flying anvils were smashing his face to a pulp and caving in his ribs. He was whirled around, banged against the bar, again and again knocked tumbling.

The salty taste of blood was strong in his mouth. He could feel the warm fluid gushing from his nose and the corners of his lips. His face was stunned, bruised, aching. And still the merciless pounding went on.

But the battle was far from being all one-sided. Despite his handicap in size, Billy was giving the big fellow plenty of punishment. Rock-hard fists beat a tattoo upon the dark, snarling face that wavered and swam before his blurred vision. It became knotty and gory, that visage—like the face of some grotesque gargoyle. The burly man, too, was reeling, going down occasionally.

Again they closed, fought at close quarters, clenched and wrestled savagely once more. Larn's tousled black hair half screened his mean little eyes. A short, jolting uppercut sent him reeling. Billy rushed him. The big fellow struck a table. Both it and a chair smashed to stove-

wood. The two men fought and floundered among the wreckage.

Larn got his boots under his opponent's belly and shot out stout legs. Billy went hurtling and landed ten feet away. Both scrambled up, rushed again like fighting bulls.

A fist smashed Larn's big nose to a pulp. A roundhouse right that carried every ounce of Billy's strength and weight cracked against the fellow's massive jaw. Again Larn thundered to the floor. He sat up and for a moment whined like a hurt dog as he held a hand to his crushed, blood-gushing nose; then, bellowing blasphemy, he dug for his six-gun. The fellow was completely insane with rage now.

Billy Groat's lunge had carried him stumbling right astride his fallen foe. He raised a worn old boot and stamped. With a howl of pain Larn let go his gun. Billy kicked it away; then sprang to it and picked it up. He was holding not only it, but his own Colt .45 as he spun around.

From a corner of one puffed and blackened eye he had seen two other men, a tall, tight-lipped one and a dog-faced, extremely bowlegged jasper, moving forward apparently with the intention of joining in the fight.

AS he pivoted he saw them stop short and drop their right hands to their guns.

"Don't flash 'em!" he warned between bruised, bleeding lips. "I can shoot two-handed and I'll drill yuh both!"

The hammers had clicked as he had rapped out the words.

He was a sight as he stood there, bleeding, disheveled, tow-colored hair awry. The two men took their hands off their gun butts.

"Don't get so salty, cowboy," the tall, cold-faced one said curtly as the big, beaten giant got up and faded aside, still gently handling the crushed nose. "He's a friend of ours, a little drunk, and we were going to help him up and take him out of here."

"Pals, huh?" yapped Billy, still at high tension. "Aimed to help him up and take him out, huh? Well, he's up and the whole danged bunch of yuh can get out. Start marching."

He motioned with a slight jerk of the two guns which he held close back at his sides. For just an instant the tall man's eyes gleamed frostily.

"All right, pals, let's go," he said quietly; then: "There's no sense getting into gun trouble over nothing."

He stepped to the bleeding gorilla of a man and shoved him roughly. That individual picked up his hat and obeyed like a child, but he was casting murderous glances behind him as the trio marched down the room. Billy followed them alertly, the two Colts still ready. But they made no overt move. They went through the door and out onto the street. Billy threw the spare gun after them. Then he holstered his own, turned back.

Larn Denger sullenly, silently retrieved his six-shooter.

"We could have taken that mountain waddy easy, Curt," dog-faced Fido Denger growled. "Why didn't we?"

"Because, yuh fool, a gun-fight would have brought the law down to investigate, and we might have been recognized," the tall, grim leader's voice cut like a knife. "That's why I wanted to pick Larn up and rush him out of the place. Yuh blundering ape!" he thrust savagely at his giant of a brother. "I ought to bend a gun barrel over that anvil head of yores. If yuh don't learn some sense yuh'll get us all killed or landed in the pen one of these days."

"He thinks he's salty," Larn mumbled stubbornly. "Made us all three look foolish in front of that crowd.

And us the notorious Denger brothers! Huh! I'd like to settle with that Billy Goat waddy."

"I'd like to even with him, too," Curt said softly, and his grey eyes narrowed and glittered. "He's the first *hombre* that ever made me eat dirt. I did it because I didn't want to spoil our game, but if ever we meet—" He did not finish, but the tightening of his thin lips was enough.

MEANWHILE, in the Four Aces Saloon, Billy Groat had picked up his battered old Stetson and jerked it down over his mop of wiry blond hair. His blue eyes were metallic behind their puffed lips as they challengingly swept the crowd, but everyone seemed for him now. Men began complimenting him for the way he had handled the three strangers. He went to the bar.

"I was asking for buttermilk when it started," he curtly reminded the bartender. "I got some when I was in here three months ago."

The barkeep's pink jowls went a shade pinker.

"Yes, I know, but as I told yuh, we ain't got any now," he said uneasily. "The widder woman who was furnishing it, sold out her little ranch and went away. We didn't have many calls for it noway. How about a bottle of beer and a—"

"No, thanks."

The fat man leaned confidentially closer—ingratiating now—as he polished a glass.

"Yuh better look out for them three fellows, cowboy," he warned. "They didn't give up because they was whupped, but because they was smart enough to realize yuh held the best hand. That big ape was looking bloody murder, and there was cold death on the face of the tall jasper. Yes, sir, yuh better look out for them three."

Billy Groat had always been a good-natured waddy under ordinary circumstances, but a fighting cougar when aroused. Now, the new friendly attitude of the crowd caused his anger to drop away. Billy was quick to forgive. He spat blood, dabbed at his cut face with his bandanna, and smiled a bit painfully. "Thanks, I'll try to keep these here swelling eyes open," he said. "Know who them hairpins are?"

"Nope, they're strangers to Bonnanza. Since the gold rush built this town overnight, all kinds of people are forever drifting in and out. Mighty bad *hombres,* some of 'em."

"Guess I'll go see a doc and get myself patched up," Billy abruptly decided.

Turning on one run-over heel he went down the room at the clumsy, waddling gait characteristic of cowboys. He was wary as he passed out onto the board sidewalk, but the three strangers had disappeared.

CHAPTER III

Holdup

IN the mountain country, night falls with startling abruptness, as if some invisible monster snorts black smoke across the heavens and into the mighty depressions. And so darkness came to the town of Bonanza City before Billy Groat had finished his steak, French fries, apple pie, and black coffee at the Chung Lung restaurant.

The silver-haired Wells Fargo clerk was still on duty. Despite the darkness, it was not very late. His rat-faced, slithery eyed assistant supposedly was uptown getting a cup of coffee and would return to duty soon. In reality, though, the fellow was hidden in the darkness a short distance from the express office, waiting.

Soon three shadows came out of

the gloom, three horsemen riding slowly. The waiting man struck a match and lighted a cigarette—a signal. The riders came on.

"That yuh, Pierson?" a voice called.

"Yeah."

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah, all okay."

The three riders came up, halted, peered at him. He held the match-flame before his narrow face. Satisfied, they reined abruptly away.

The stage office was located near one end of Bonanza City. A good many steeply slanted ravines gashed the sides of the canyon in which the town lay. There was one of these ravines within thirty yards of the stage office, and it was toward it that the three Dengers had turned. There Pierson, the faithless Fargo clerk, waited.

The three desperadoes came tramping back; then like four skulking wolves the evil quartette headed for the stage office. Through a side window they could see the silver-haired office manager at his desk, quite unconscious of the approaching menace. The stage was due in thirty minutes. After its arrival and departure the office was always closed.

The four men stopped behind a bushy mountain juniper.

"When yuh see the shade go down, come ahead," Pierson said.

The next moment his thin, slightly stooped form was a slinking shadow in the gloom.

Curt Denger laughed softly, a poisonous sort of laugh. His two killer brothers chuckled, too.

Curt and Pierson had once done time together. When Curt had slipped into Bonanza City to spy out the town with a view to a possible bank robbery, he had been pleased to find that his ex-cellmate was a Wells Fargo clerk. He had browbeaten Pierson into admitting that rich shipments passed through the office; that a large sum in gold coin was to be shipped that very night. Curt immediately had planned a robbery. Pierson had objected, saying that he was going straight, but he was a weakling, while Curt Denger was an overpoweringly forceful man.

And so the nefarious scheme had been hatched. The masked trio was to slug the silver-haired office manager. Pierson was to open the safe and hand out the money bag. He would not flee with the Dengers, for he felt certain that no one would suspect him. His share of the loot was to be left cached at a designated spot.

But the Dengers had no thought of going through with this part of the bargain; moreover, they meant not merely to slug the silver-haired chief clerk, but to kill him. He had been with the company for a long time. Once, when he had been stationed in the Black Hills country, they had tried to rob his office. He had frustrated the attempt and had wounded both Curt and Fido. Curt Denger had planned a cold-blooded revenge.

"STICK 'em up!" the order came like the snarl of some beast.

Both clerks wheeled around in swivel chairs. The silver-haired one's features stiffened as he recognized the three hard faces beyond the bars of the cell-like office. Death was written on each of them. The Dengers had not even taken the trouble to mask—since they meant to kill the man anyway.

The two Fargo men stood up and raised their hands. The older one flicked a sidewise glance toward a desk drawer.

"Careful, Boss!" the other warned huskily. "It would be suicide."

Pierson had left the door unlocked—according to plan. While Larn and Fido kept the two clerks covered, Curt went quickly inside and to the

tall, silver-haired man. For a moment they looked at each other, the clerk grim; Curt smiling coldly, triumphantly. Then Curt's thin lips jerked tight and with a vicious curse he struck. The chief clerk collapsed. There he lay, huddled on his side, one cheek to the floor, blood slowly reddening a side of his silver-grey head.

"Quick! Get that box open!" ordered Curt. "Somebody may come along any minute."

And someone did come along. Just as Pierson got to the door there sounded footsteps and a clinking of spurs.

Cursing softly, the three Dengers wheeled to face the little waiting room. Pierson spun around on his heel; like a cornered rat he crouched against the safe. His talonlike right hand had darted under a side of his cheap coat. His droopy lips were flickering, and there was desperation in his pale eyes.

Curt Denger began snapping orders in a low, incisive voice. He always thought and acted swiftly, coolly in emergencies.

"Keep your wits, Pierson! Get rid of him! We'll duck under the counter. Help me grab this knocked-out bird, Larn. Fido, put something over that blood splotch."

Curt and Larn seized the slugged Fargo man, swung him under the counter, and squatted over him. Fido snatched a cushion from a swivel chair, slapped it over the small pool of blood; then wheeled and went under the counter. Pierson shoved the safe door closed.

He slithered quickly into his chair, and with his humped back toward the waiting room, pretended to be working.

A boot clumped upon the threshold. Footsteps came to the office window; stopped.

"Evening, Mr. Clerk," a cheerful voice greeted.

The three Denger brothers, crouched there under the counter with guns drawn, tensed and glanced at one another. They had recognized the voice of Billy Groat, the mountain waddy.

CHAPTER IV

Denger Fashion

PIERSON swung around in his chair.

"Good evening, cowboy; what can I do for you?"

Billy grinned, the best semblance of his usual good-natured grin that sore and swollen lips would frame.

"I'm expecting a pair of shopmade boots which I ordered. Have they got here yet? Billy Groat's the name."

"No, we haven't anything for yuh."

"Then maybe they'll come in on the next stage. They're past due. Reckon I'll just set down out here and wait."

The rat-faced clerk's eyes flicked uneasily.

"But—but it's nearly thirty minutes until stage time," he objected.

"Shucks, I don't mind. I got more time than anything else. I'll just set down out here and smoke. I see somebody has left a newspaper. I'll enjoy the paper, for I live such a maverick's life in the mountains I nearly lose track of what's going on in the civilized world."

He turned away, boots clumping leisurely, spur chains dragging on the floor.

It was a moment of crisis for the robbers. Other men might come along at any moment, for the stage was due in twenty minutes. Pierson had stretched the time when he said thirty. The rat-faced clerk shot a desperate glance at his three crouched accomplices in crime. Again Curt Denger took the initiative.

With a jerk of his head and his gun, he ordered his brothers into action.

They stepped noiselessly from under the counter; then bobbed up and turned. Their gun muzzles dropped to cover the cowboy's back. He heard the clicking of gun hammers and instinctively sank low.

As he had ducked he wheeled halfway around and sent a hand diving for his Colt.

There was a blast of gunfire, but his quick action had saved him. The slugs whisked over his bent back and drilled through the wall. In his very first glimpse of the hard faces behind the bars he recognized the three men and guessed why they were there.

As his .45 cleared leather he was leaping for the door, still humped very low.

The flitting bars spoiled his aim, and that of the bandits. The Dengers were ducking and bobbing their heads as they shot. Billy's slugs were ringing against the steel rods and glancing viciously. Those fired by the outlaws all passed behind him, so fast was he moving.

While gunning for him, Fido and Larn had been making for the office door. They got to it and out into the waiting room just as Billy Groat flung open the front door. Once more they fired, but he had hurled himself obliquely into the night with such quickness that again they missed. Cursing, they went pounding after him.

Curt Denger had wheeled even before Billy had escaped from the little stage depot. He would leave Billy Groat to his two lead-slinging brothers.

There was need for all possible haste. The shooting would bring men on the run.

"Quick! The money!" he rapped out at the clerk, who had jumped from his chair as gunfire broke loose, and now was cowering, chalk-faced, halfway between his desk and the safe.

He sprang to the steel box, flung back the door, grabbed out a heavy money bag and thrust it into Curt's arms.

"I'll have to go with yuh," he gasped. "I can't stay here after what we tried to put over on the cowboy. He'd tell."

A shot outside cut off his further speech.

Curt's long legs were carrying him swiftly across the office. With the buckskin bag hugged to him, he looked aside and fired two shots into the inert form under the counter.

"What did yuh do that for?" husked Pierson. "It's murder." He was frantically following the outlaw boss.

At the open office door Curt twisted around while in full stride.

"So's this!" he snarled. We can't have a rat like you along." His gun cracked again, and the faithless clerk flopped to the floor with a bullet hole in his forehead. Curt went long-legged on toward the front door.

AFTER lunging through the waiting room door, Billy had sprinted for a corner of the little building. As he ran, his face was turned backward and his gun was held ready to spew lead at the first form that appeared in the doorway. Two came stampeding out. He fired, but his right boot-toe struck a rock just as he pulled the trigger and he went sprawling.

Nevertheless, a howl of pain told that his shot had not been entirely wasted.

Inside the office three shots banged out, and Billy wondered fleetingly.

His fall had carried him past the corner of the little building, and now without taking the precious time to scramble up he rolled himself to the left. As he did so, he was expect-

ing to hear the drumfire of two six-guns and feel the vicious stinging of leaden hornets, but neither of these things happened.

Behind the corner he slued himself around, still flat on his belly, and shoved his six-gun and his face past the corner. He was surprised to see two shadowy forms running toward the opposite corner.

He fired at them, but as he did so they ducked behind a little loading platform.

He heard a swift clink-clinking and understood. In their wild firing inside the building, both gunmen had quickly emptied their weapons. Now the gunmen were reloading.

His immediate impulse was to leap up and rush them; then with lightning rapidity he calculated that his gun, too, was empty.

He jerked himself onto his knees, anxious to shove at least two cartridges into the gun before the killers would rush him, but as he thrust the punch-rod once, ejecting an empty, there was wild stamping of boots and a tall form came charging out of the doorway.

"Larn! Fido! Let's go!"

Billy Groat tensed. Larn! Fido! Then the three strangers must be the notorious Denger brothers. There was a reward of six thousand dollars offered for them, dead or alive.

"But that lousy mountain ranny's hidin' behind the other corner," one of the others objected.

"Never mind him right now. Come on, you fools! We've got to burn horseshoes. The whole town's coming a-helling."

And indeed it did seem so. On the main street there was a hubbub of excited voices and a hurried stamping of feet.

Curt Denger was running on toward the dark, steeply slanted ravine thirty yards from the stage depot.

Two shadowy forms bobbed up from behind the tiny platform and streaked after him.

By this time Billy Groat's agile fingers, working smoothly, rapidly, had managed to reload three chambers of his six-gun. Three shots would be enough if he could make each one count. He sprang past the corner of the little building and shouted: "Halt!"

Perhaps it was a foolish thing to do, but Billy Groat could not shoot even cold-blooded killers like the Denger brothers in the back.

Two fire-flowers blossomed out there in the gloom. It seemed that a bomb giving vari-colored lights burst right in front of his face. Then darkness fell.

WHEN his senses swam dizzily back he found himself being hauled along by rough hands. He was amidst a mob of yelling, stamping, excited men. Blurredly he saw the glow of the stage office windows. He was being half dragged into the little waiting room. Inside, feet were stamping and men were talking crisply.

He was slammed into a waiting room seat; then many drilling eyes pierced him. The tight ring of humanity parted at one place and a lean, grizzly, leathery old man and a chunky, grim dark one stood before him. He recognized the sheriff and a deputy.

"Both the clerks have been murdered and the safe robbed," the sheriff said tersely. "Talk fast, cowboy."

In every crowd, during moments of excitement, there are inebriates or nitwits who are ready to incite riot.

"He's one of the killer bandits!" someone yelled. "Hang the stinkin' skunk!"

A sinister growl went through the crowd.

CHAPTER V

Snowshoe Cowboy

THE new crisis electrified Billy Groat's brain to a more normal sense of what was happening.

"For gosh sake, don't yuh savvy?" he cried as he pushed himself up and stood weaving before the leathery old sheriff and the grim deputy. "I caught the robbers in the act. We fought. They creased me and got away to their horses over there in the gulch. It was the Denger brothers; the same three men I had the row with in the Four Aces. I heard the tall one crack out: 'Larn! Fido! Let's go!'"

He ran on swiftly as the many eyes continued to stare; told why he had come there; what had happened.

"They were in the office, me in the waiting room when the battle started. Yuh can see the walls are all splattered with bullet holes. If yuh'll examine the clerks' guns, if they've got any, yuh'll find they didn't do the firing. Furthermore, if I was one of the bandits, how could I have been shot down outside, when them two are laying dead inside. Yuh'll find my cayuse still stabled, and—"

"We'll investigate," the grizzled sheriff shut him off.

They found that everything Billy Groat had said was true, and so he was immediately absolved from suspicion. Sign in the slanted ravine showed that three horses had waited there, but the ground was so rocky that it could not be determined in what direction the robbers had fled.

The fastest horses in town were commandeered, and posses were despatched both ways along the winding, bumpy stage-trail.

"It's all we can do right now," the sheriff groaned. "To try to comb these mountains at night would be plumb foolish. All we can do is lay traps to catch 'em when they come out."

Again Billy Groat was given medical attention. As he left the doctor's office and stepped again onto the street, a short gust of wind puffed in his face—then there was calm. He raised his head and sniffed like some wise animal.

"Blizzard a-coming," he muttered. "I smell it. And with them pore dogies in the north canyon. They ought to be moved farther down into the wooded parks, where the tall trees and old Camelback will protect 'em."

He decided to hit the trail for his little Mile-high ranch immediately. He could reach old Fuzzface Haplin's trapper camp by midnight, spend the rest of the night there; then ride on early in the morning.

His weather forecast proved correct. It was sleeting and snowing by the time he reached the trapper's shack. He spent the rest of the night there, and pushed on at daylight. The fall blizzard was still in progress, but Billy Groat was used to mountain weather.

He reached his Mile-high ranch shortly before midday. As he came suddenly out of a stand of jackpines and onto the edge of the clearing, he pulled up short. His jaws went rigid and his swollen lips tight. The small cabin which he had built with such patient labor had been burned down.

He touched his bronc lightly with the spurs and moved to the very edge of the spread of ashes. Leaning from his saddle, he read a crudely printed sign, held by a stick shoved into the ground:

BILLY GOAT:
THIS HERE ONLY PARTLY SETTLES. WE'LL BE SEEING YOU AGAIN.
THE DENGERS.

For a long time Billy sat slumped

in his saddle, face like brown stone, gazing morosely. A clattering of hoofs and a halloo brought him out of his gloomy apathy. He twisted in his saddle and looked back down the trail. A small party of men were approaching—the sheriff and a posse.

"Gosh, what's this?" asked the lanky old sheriff, as the little band of riders pulled to a stop.

Billy pointed silently, glumly, to the scrawled sign. The sheriff rode close and read it.

"Um-m!" He straightened in his saddle and twisted a strand of his long, grey mustache. "I figured they must've come this way. When a party of my men, tearin' down the trail, met the stage, the Fargo men said they hadn't seen nobody. Likewise, the ranches along both reaches of the stage-road reported that no riders had been seen. Consequent, I figured them scoun'els had hit straight east, aimin' to git over the ridge by way of Beartooth Pass. This here—" with a sweep of a long arm he indicated the sign and the spread of ashes—"proves that I was right."

"Wait a minute, Sheriff!" Billy Groat's eyes were squinted in thought. "Curt Denger's said to be a fox. Now it wouldn't be a smart trick to burn down my cabin and post this here sign, because it would have been advertising that the fugitives come this way."

"So what?" the sheriff asked. He was a conscientious, but rather pig-headed old-timer who didn't like suggestions as to how he should run his business.

"They wouldn't have turned back, knowing they were mighty liable to run into some of the swarm of men who're looking for them," Billy Groat went on thoughtfully. "That leaves only Pinnacle Pass, the narrow gap to north."

"Bosh," snorted the old sheriff. "It's plumb evident they're makin' for Beartooth Pass and the flat lands beyond the eastern slope. Tacklin' Pinnacle Pass while a blizzard is blowin' is just about suicide. But even if they'd gone that way, I wouldn't foller 'em. I ain't leadin' my men into no nature's death-trap. Besides, if the pass is still clear we wouldn't be able to overtake 'em before they got through. And once over the ridge and into that wild Wilderness Canyon we never in Gawd's world could round 'em up. Come on, boys, le's go."

THE posse swung into action. Billy Groat did not accompany them. He continued to sit slumped in his saddle, pondering morosely.

Then he swung abruptly toward the little cedar-pole corral, determination frozen behind the bruises on his face. He unsaddled his bronc and hung his riding equipment away. He gave the mustang a generous helping of feed, and left the corral bars down so that the mountain-bred animal could get out and find protection from the blizzard, should the weather become more rigorous.

His boots crunching ankle deep in snow, Billy went to a little out-house which the robbers had spared. It was a dirt-floored structure built of rocks and poles, which he utilized as a storehouse. He exchanged his bat-wing chaps for black goat-hair ones, wrapped his boots in gunnysacking, then took down a pair of snowshoes from a nail and began strapping them to his feet.

"I reckon them town-alecs would guy me again if they could see me ridin' these," he thought. "A cowboy on snowshoes!" His swollen lips twisted in a humorless grin.

Billy Groat was mountain-wise. The sheriff had said that if the Dengers had made for Pinnacle Pass, the posse could not overtake them before they reached that narrow cut, and he was right. But in order to

reach the lofty mountain gap it would be necessary for the fugitives to round the east point of old Camelback. Horsemen could not surmount that rugged, snowclad ridge, but a man on snowshoes could. By cutting straight across the mountain, there was a chance for Billy to reach the pass ahead of the desperadoes.

With his saddle carbine slung over one shoulder, the mountain waddy started trekking. In each mittened hand he held a slender juniper rod —to afford stability and to hasten progress.

Mile after mile he trudged, mounting ever upward, upward, upward; steadily toward the gap between the twin domes of old Camelback. And as he marched he was oblivious to the pelting of sleet and snow against his face; to the moaning and crackling in the pines. His mind was grimly intent upon his purpose.

Eventually he found himself in the saddle of old Camelback. The blunt peaks on either side stood barren and cold. The five-mile sweep of space between those mighty hummocks was desolate, lonely, treeless. He slid his way steadily across a barren, convex stretch of white surface where winds howled like insane ghosts, and played fantastic tricks with the drift-snow—then he was on the down-slope. Below him lay that tremendous mingled dark and white gash in the earth known as Wilderness Canyon.

The sleeting had stopped. The snowfall had thickened until now he could see the canyon only blurredly, but as he plodded on, the grey curtain suddenly lifted. He stopped, rubbed flakes from his lashes, swept the vast gulch with his gaze.

Almost immediately his eyes focused. He smiled grimly. Three riders were laboring up the steep slope which reached to that gunsight gap called Pinnacle Pass. Their horses were wading knee-deep in snow. It was the Denger brothers all right. Curt was in the lead, Fido next, Larn in the rear, drooping in his saddle.

A quick survey of the situation showed Billy Groat that by swinging abruptly to the left and snowshoeing his way along the slope, he might by supreme effort be able to reach the pass ahead of the outlaws. And so he turned and started along the side of the slope at a clumsy but space-consuming gait.

It was the eagle-eyed Curt who first discovered him. Billy saw the eldest Denger pull up, twist in the saddle, point. Fido and Larn had stopped, too. The cowboy laughed hollowly.

"Now there'll be some fun," he muttered.

He saw those three forms dip; knew by the gestures as they straightened that they had flung rifles to shoulders. Snow spurted up a yard in front of him. He heard a bullet cut through a shrub a few feet behind. Another snapped like a firecracker close to his head. The Dengers had placed their first shots close, considering that they were shooting up-slope from a distance of five hundred yards, and at a moving target.

While still snowshoeing at top speed, Billy Groat unslung his carbine and levered a cartridge into the firing chamber.

CHAPTER VI

Mountain Justice

WILDERNESS CANYON was a depression so vast that its far rim swam in dizziness, and its eastern reach was lost in the distance; but westward it swept sharply upward and ended against sawtoothed peaks. Directly in the middle of that curved uplift

was the mountain gap known as Pinnacle Pass. Below was another canyon, somewhat sheltered, and not so very far beyond were the settlements for which the outlaws were making.

Evidently realizing that if Billy Groat beat them to the pass he would be able to hold them off, the Denger brothers drove their mounts hard, sending them bucking and fighting up the mountainside; but the slope was sharp and the snow deep, and so their progress was slow. Billy Groat on his snowshoes was beating them.

Curt's horse flopped suddenly onto its side and slid for a little way; then lay floundering in an attempt to regain its feet. The rider had managed to kick free of the saddle, and now Billy saw him picking himself up out of the white smother. The pony was on its legs an instant later. Curt began brushing snow from his Winchester.

They had seen that he was going to win out in the race for the gap, and so Fido and Larn, too, got down. Knee-deep in the snow, the three killers stood and started hurling lead again. This time Billy's danger was far more serious. The outlaw Dengers were expert marksmen. Their first bullets zipped nerve-tinglingly close.

It would be just a matter of a few seconds until one of them stung him, unless—

He put a little splotch of stunted mountainside pines between himself and the outlaws. Again the firing ceased.

Billy gave up his race for the gap. He realized that if he hurried on he must cross a long snow-clad open space, and that the sharp-shooting Dengers probably would down him before he could gain the pass.

When he came to the lower edge of that stand of dark trees and threw his gaze again into the canyon, the Dengers had disappeared. Their horses were standing hock-deep in snow, tails to the storm which again was casting grey film over the wild mountain scenery.

The stunted pines streaked down the sharp slope, right and left, in two long lines. He reasoned that the killer bandits had got into one, perhaps both of those timber points, and were stalking him.

With hands that shook from the cold, he took some cartridges from a pocket of his coat and fed his carbine all the additional ammunition that it would take.

Resting his rifle against the side of a sapling, Billy Groat deliberately shot down the three horses. There was deep pity, almost tears in his eyes as he fired. The cowboy loved horses, but humanity was more important than horseflesh. Without mounts there was no chance for the outlaws to escape across the ridge and to the far settlements.

A LEADEN twilight was falling. The cold wind howled drearily, bearing a flurry of glassy snow.

Not knowing from what direction the attack was to come, Billy faded back into a streak of underbrush and waited. He had not been in concealment long before he glimpsed a moving form in the jackpines to his right—a skulking, cautious form.

Billy knew that his trail would be seen, followed to his hiding-place, so now he started snowshoeing his way swiftly through the brush in a circling movement designed to bring him up behind Fido Denger before that gunman reached a point from which he could look down upon the place from which Billy had fired.

The mountain waddy succeeded in his purpose. Silently he glided out of a thicket of aspens and saw his human quarry immediately before him. Fido was cautiously wading knee-deep through snow, holding his

rifle ready. Billy leveled down with his carbine.

"Drop that rifle and put 'em up, *hombre!*" he called in a voice that cracked sharply above the whistling of the cold wind.

Fido Denger stiffened to a stop. For just an instant he was like a frozen man.

"Drop it!" Billy called again; and then with a curse the outlaw was pivoting and crouching low, swinging his rifle to bear.

EVEN though Billy had been prepared for such a move, so quick was the gunwise outlaw that his rifle cracked before the mountain waddy pulled his own trigger, but in his desperate haste Fido missed. The bullet jerked viciously through Billy's fleece-lined coat.

Crack! went the lever of the desperado's Winchester, pumping in another cartridge. Then Billy Groat fired.

Through the blurring snow he saw the canine, red-stubbled face grimace; then Fido Denger pitched forward into the snow.

Billy did not go to him. He had seen a red dot appear in the gunman's forehead. Now his eyes were alert for the other two outlaws. Since they had not been with Fido, he reasoned that they were sneaking up through the opposite string of timber. He began cautiously moving in that direction.

A hundred yards from the scene of the killing he suddenly stopped. Through the grey veil of storm he saw a slinking human form passing twenty yards down the slope—Curt Denger.

Curt's eagle eyes found Billy at almost the same instant. Their rifle muzzles jerked around together. The weapons spoke in unison. Billy weaved his body aside. A bullet ripped through his left shoulder, causing him to release his hold of the carbine with that hand. His shot went into the snow.

Click-clack went the lever of Curt's Winchester. His thin lips were twisted in triumph now, for it looked like an easy kill.

Billy Groat had always been fast with a six-gun, and now desperation speeded his hand. He fired from the hip just as Curt Denger was bringing up his rifle again. He saw the outlaw tense, saw a look of stunned surprise on the marble-like face.

Deliberately, lips set, putting every dying nerve, muscle and faculty into the last effort, Curt Denger started lifting his rifle again. He knew that he was through, but he wanted to take Billy Groat into death with him.

Again Billy's six-gun bucked in his grasp. The rifle ceased to move. It fell from the outlaw's grasp. For just an instant Curt Denger's tall form remained upright, while blood streaked down his rigid face from a hole in his right cheek bone. Then abruptly he fell.

Billy's eyes flicked alertly here and there in quest of Larn, the human gorilla. The mountain waddy began moving cautiously along parallel to the deep trail which the outlaw boss had cut in the snow.

He had gone no farther than fifty yards when he saw bulky Larn, seated on a fallen tree with rifle across lap. Ten feet to the man's left was the beginning of a barren slope that dropped away sharply for a distance of a hundred yards.

The snowfall had thinned again, and Billy could see a look of dumb misery on the outlaw's visage as the big fellow sat there, hunched, face turned anxiously in the direction from which the sounds of firing had come. He was breathing heavily.

Billy understood. Bulky, suffering from a bullet wound, unaccustomed to such altitude, Larn Denger had become suddenly weak. Billy felt a

sudden sympathy for the big ape. The cowboy rested his six-gun against the side of a pine.

"All right, fellow, throw that rifle away; then get up with yore hands high," he called out.

Larn started. His face came around slowly, and the close-set eyes in his narrow, sloping forehead found the cowboy. For a moment he did not move; just stared. Then he stood up, letting his rifle drop into the snow, but he did not raise his hands.

"I reckon yuh got Curt and Fido," he said dully.

"Right, and I'll get yuh, too, if yuh don't put up them hands."

A bitter, stupid sort of grin twisted the gross features.

"Us Dengers always swore we wouldn't be taken alive. With yuh there thirty yards away, sheltered by the tree, and with a dead bead on me, I wouldn't have a chance in a quick-draw shoot-out, but I can at least do this."

Very deliberately his big right hand went to his holster and began pulling out his six-shooter.

"Stop it!" yapped Billy, but the gorilla man only laughed hollowly.

He pointed the muzzle of the gun not toward the mountain waddy, but placed it against his own breast.

"Wait!" cried Billy. "For gosh sake, man!"

But the gun barked muffledly. Billy saw it jump as the concussion jolted it from the broad breast—then it dropped into the snow.

Larn's great arm fell limply to his side. With a blank look on his ape-like visage, he started plodding dazedly, aimlessly, but with apparent full strength. Billy Groat marveled, wondered how the man could wade through the snow like that after shooting himself in the breast. Then suddenly Larn Denger keeled over.

He was right on the rim of the barren, steep slope. There was a natural trough, and in it the snow had drifted deep. The big body went diving from sight under the white surface.

Billy Groat sighed. He circled and went down the slope to where the three horses lay dead. From one of Curt Denger's saddle pockets he took first-aid materials, and dressed his wounded shoulder as best he could. From the other he took the bag of money which had been stolen from the Wells Fargo office. By this time a sullen darkness was settling.

"I'm plumb sorry I didn't get to move them dogies from the north range, down into shelter today," he mumbled, as he started trudging toward home, "but this here other business was more important. Them dead outlaws are worth two thousand dollars apiece."

How Well Do You Know Your West?

See whether you can answer these five questions — and after you've written your answers down, check up on page 129 to see whether you've savvied 'em proper!

1. Was Jesse James ever in jail?
2. From what is the name Oklahoma taken?
3. In what year was Billy the Kid killed?
4. What were the first names of the Earp brothers, famous outlaw-hunters?
5. What is the lowest and hottest point in the West?

Happy LANDINGS

Johnny Hooker's as Fond o' Sports as Any Ol' Cowman — but the Ski's the Limit!

By
GRANT TAYLOR

Author of "All Bull," "Horn-Swoggled Hero," etc.

THERE ought tuh be a law agin folks travelin' any way 'cept on a good horse. The way it is nowadays when a feller wants tuh go some place, he hops in a gas buggy an' yanks both its ears down an' stands right up on the gas jigger, till the first thing he knows he's turned out tuh let a bridge go by. Time they git the Lizzie's engine off his neck, he ain't interested no more in the place he was goin'.

Gimme a good horse—that's me, Johnny Hooker of Hooker Bros.' cow outfit oratin'. As head o' the

Instead o' stayin' on both feet, they buries their noses in the ground and plows up the snow

A HOOKER BROS. STORY

cow firm o' Hooker Bros. here in Canyon Lobo, I ain't ever in sich a hurry tuh git some place that I'll risk havin' my backbone rammed out through my collar. Take yore time an' git where you're goin' an' in one piece—that's how I figger it.

But take that coot of a li'l brother Stevie o' mine, what's my partner in this here cow gamble, an' our two no-'count leather pounders, "One-Ton" Benson an' Pablo, they're loco enough tuh try anything that'll save 'em a few seconds o' time. An' even Old George, our cook, what's old enough to figger on growin' him a pair o' wings, he's got this desire for blindin' speed.

It's jest the other evenin' while I shovel hay tuh our old saddle horses that I'm thinkin' how lucky t' be livin' 'way out on a ranch where folks c'n waste a few seconds o' time and not miss no trains. All we got to do, even on a winter like this what plumb runs up into summer with snow three foot on the level, is take our time shovelin' hay out tuh a bunch o' goggle-eyed cows.

'Bout the time I gits done congratulatin' myself on this, my li'l brother Stevie an' One-Ton rattles up in our old flivver with a load o' chuck from Sunset.

While we're unloadin' canned corn and sech-like, I grab a holt of somethin' what looks like a bunch o' long boards.

"What yuh got here?" I asks, while I'm settin' back tryin' tuh pull 'em out o' the load. "Goin' to build a chicken coop?"

"Hey, easy on them!" bawls Stevie. "Them's skis me an' One-Ton bought so's we can git around quick and speedy over this here snow."

"An' what in tarnation is skees?" I wants tuh know, pullin' 'em on out tuh have a look.

"Be careful, can't yuh?" hollers Stevie. "Yuh ain't movin' no pianny. What is skis? Why, yuh pore dumb knothead, they is what yuh tie on yore feet tuh slide around over the snow when she's too deep tuh flounder around on a horse."

"Any time I can't ride a horse nowhere I'll stay home," I tells him. "This snow won't last forever. Next yuh'll want tuh start raisin' reindeer and livin' in a Eskimo igloo."

"Be up to date!" yowls One-Ton. "Everybody's takin' to skis in this country. Muley Hanks got him a pair. Old Bill Benz is outfittin' all his cowboys with 'em. The feller in Sunset, what's sellin' 'em an' explainin' how tuh use 'em, he claims they'll revolutionize the cow biz in winter. All we do is go slidin' around over the snow 'stead o' bustin' through it with some played-out old hoss. Skis'll reduce half the work on a ranch in winter."

"IS that so?" I bellers. "I might o' knowed there was somethin' in these tuh reduce work. Anythin' like that listens good tuh a pair o' simple-minded, wuthless cow nurses. Take 'em back and trade 'em fer pitchforks, yuh hear me?" I orders. "Any time we got tuh take out after our cows with these things strapped to our hoofs, it'll be when me, Johnny Hooker, boss o' this here outfit, is dead an' buried so deep a kiote can't smell me."

"Aw, dry up, Johnny," Stevie tells me. "These is jest the thing we need to go up into high country tuh shove down cows. With these skis we can—"

Me, I heard plenty about skis. They ain't goin' to be no cowboys on my ranch makin' fools of theirselfs. This is a time when I got t' git rough.

There ain't no use tuh argue with locoed hardheads what ain't got 'nough brains tuh grease the bottom of a Dutch oven. I grabs the crank off old Lizzie an' makes a pass at Stevie. Stevie dodges, an'

all I do is knock the radiator cap off the old car an' then him an' One-Ton grabs them sleigh runners and skedaddles into the house.

That's the way it allus goes. Me tryin' tuh run this outfit on a bizness basis an' gittin' no more cooperation from them knotheads than you'd git from a balky jassack. Well, sometimes I got tuh use force on this ranch an' other times use a li'l diplomacy. I figgers this time I'll be easy on them boys and try diplomacy. I'll jist let them half-wits try usin' them contraptions an' stand around laughin' at 'em. Jest one day of them skis and they'll be plumb tickled tuh fork a horse.

It starts snowin' that night another foot on what we already got, which tickles them two simps plumb tuh death. They git out a big can o' bear grease an' grease the bottom o' them skis. Then they polish 'em with a old wool sock 'til they c'd be used for lookin'-glasses.

Danged if at a time when flowers oughta be springin' out if it don't snow fer two days an' nights, an' the wind piles 'er up in drifts fifteen and twenty foot deep.

Take me, Johnny Hooker, I'm plumb worried. This makes the biggest snow we had in fifteen years, an' it's sure to of ketched a lot of our stuff up in the Rim Country.

Next mornin' I saddle up an' hit fer the high country, plumb ignorin' them two ski-boys. This is a situation which needs a weak mind an' a strong back t' save some cows. Up country about five miles with my horse gittin' tuckered wadin' drifts, I meet a bunch o' steers stampedin' down toward me. Can't figger out what's skeered 'em till a big grizzly bear comes slidin' off a bank at my side an' lands plumb straggle o' my neck, He knocks me about fourteen feet an' we both go plumb out o' sight in a big snowdrift.

No dang bear what ought t' be hibernatin' in a hole can git funny with me, Johnny Hooker; an' when I come up I grabs fer some hair an' figger tuh teach *Senor* Bear a lesson.

"Hey, fer Gawd's sake, let up!" this here bear begins tuh holler, an' when I wiggle out an' stand up I'm danged if it ain't that ganglin' neighbor of ours, Muley Hanks.

"WHAT'S the idea, jumpin' straddle o' my neck?" I bellers. "An' where at's yore horse?"

"I ain't got no horse, Johnny," says Muley. "I was jist hazin' them steers down country on my skis, an' I didn't see that there high bank till too late."

An' then I see Muley has got a pair o' them danged skis strapped tuh his boots and one of them poles with a li'l wheel in the end t' push him along. Danged if Muley ain't gone loco the same as One-Ton an' Stevie! This here cow country is losin' its mind.

"I thought Stevie an' One-Ton was the only crazy folks in the country," I remarks, crawlin' back on my horse an' watchin' Muley straighten out his skis. "But I guess yuh're overdue tuh hit your second childhood. Next yuh'll be wantin' a fire engine an' some tin soldiers fer Xmas."

"Talk as yuh want," said Muley, "but this beats proddin' a old horse through these drifts. That is, when yuh learn how tuh run 'em. I ain't quite learnt how yet, but I covered ten miles already this mornin' an' I betcha there ain't a critter up above here."

Which ain't hard tuh believe. No self-respectin' cow would linger in a country with a man a-hellin' around 'em with a sled on each foot. I decides Muley is right about no more cows bein' up that crick, so I drifts up acrost a ridge an' come down in Crazy Horse Canyon.

The goin' gits tougher and tougher an' my old horse, Ranger, is played out when I gits there. I decides I might as well hit fer home. Mebbe there might be somethin' tuh this ski idea if they'd make 'em fer horses.

Purty soon I run acrost a place where the snow is all tore up an' a bunch o' cow tracks is leadin' off down country. An' follerin' 'em up is the tracks left by two pairs o' foot sleds—Stevie's an' One-Ton's, I guesses. Every onct in a while is a big hole punched in the snow, which must o' been where them smart alecks taken head-dives. Well, as long as they hits on their heads they won't be damaged none.

I'm about two miles from the ranch in a narrow canyon when somethin' comes sizzlin' through the air right over my head, landin' *kerplunk,* in a big snowdrift an' sinkin' plumb out o' sight afore I see what it is.

I'm still starin', wonderin', when I hear a yell an' I look around jest in time tuh see what looks like a yearlin' steer with a windmill tied tuh his feet come sailin' off the cliff an' land in the top of a cedar tree. I can tell it's One-Ton by the way it hollered. One-Ton knocked most o' the branches off the tree an' turned over about six times 'fore he dives out o' sight in a drift.

I got troubles o' my own, 'cause all this unnatcheral goin's-on has uncorked old Ranger an' I'm about tuh git unloaded myself. Soon as I git him tamed down I ride back tuh see what's happened tuh them high-flyin' snow birds.

The snow is boilin' up where them two dived under an' purty soon the peanut-brains sticks their heads up an' try tuh scramble out. They don't have much luck, so I toss 'em my rope an' jerk 'em back on the trail. Guess here is where them two idjits has learned their lessons, but all they do is start braggin' how they cleaned all the cows out o' the upper country.

"Includin' a few cedar trees," I says, sarcastic. "Why don't yuh git one o' these here paryshutes?"

"Oh, that ain't nothin'," says li'l Stevie, diggin' the snow out o' one ear. "Me an' One-Ton was jist practisin' a li'l high-jumpin'. This here feller that sold us the skis is goin' to have a jumpin' tournyment soon as we learn how tuh handle 'em a li'l better. We got these things halter broke a'ready. All we need is practise."

"Yeah," yowls One-Ton, "but after this I'm goin' tuh pick a place to do my practisin' where they ain't no cedars. I got a knot on my head which feels like I'm sproutin' a horn."

"Yeah, an' I got ten dollars which says we turned more cows today than Johnny did," boasts that li'l coot of a Stevie. "An' another five which says we can beat him tuh the ranch."

I don't take them bets. In the first place I ain't turned no cows a-tall, what with the sky rainin' weak-minded cowboys and ranchers with turned-up boards on their feet. An' I don't figger on crowdin' a good horse tuh earn a li'l cash. All I does is jist ride off dignified.

I DON'T lose no time gittin' back, but I'm a she-goat if them two boys ain't already there when I ride in t' the ranch. That sorta opens my eyes. It ain't never been said that me, Johnny Hooker, ain't quick tuh reckernize anythin' that's effishent, an' I think mebbe-so there's somethin' in them foot sleds.

There ain't no gittin' round it: Muley Hanks shore cleaned all the critters out o' that crick an' it looks like Stevie an' One-Ton scared 'em all out o' Crazy Horse. Only thing I see, 'sides needin' good brakes on them things, is a paryshute in case

yuh try jumpin' a canyon what's too wide.

But next mornin' Stevie and One-Ton is so stiff an' stove up we dang near got tuh tail 'em up outa their bunks. Lookin' at them cripples, I figger I'll wait a while 'fore I trade old Ranger fer a pair of skis.

WE'RE jest through breakfast when there comes a flock of fellers, four of 'em on skis, and pushin' theirselfs along with them li'l poles with wheels on 'em. One is Muley Hanks and there is "Doodlebug" Edwards what's foreman for our neighbor, Bill Benz; an' there's the feller what's in Sunset sellin' skis, stranger named Knoot Hanson; and his pal what calls hisself Ivor Peterson. They've dropped in t' see how the cow-ski boys is makin' out.

"Knoot Hanson here," says Muley Hanks, "is lookin' for a place to hold a ski tournyment. He says that hill back of the place where yuh're feedin' those cattle would be fine for startin' a jump."

"Absolutely," says this Knoot Hanson. "It's jist the right height for a take-off. An' your cattle has packed the snow down nicely."

"Has they so?" I says. "An they are goin' tuh keep on packin' it down. That's our feed-ground, and I don't figger on havin' nobody ram a ski through one o' my cows."

"Hold on there!" Stevie busts in. "I'm a pardner on this ranch, an' if our feed-ground can be used for a sportin' event, we'll be glad to donate it. We c'n feed our cows somewhere else."

"Only over my dead body," I says t' that, but they don't pay no more attenshun to me than a stone elephant pays to a gnat buzzin' in his ear. Here's another one of them times where I got tuh be hard an' show I'm ramrod here. But as I git wound up, I happens t' think that these boys tryin' t' jump off a hill, chances are someone will bust a leg or arm an' this foolishness will stop. Knoot Hanson he says he'll go down now and give us a exerbishun tuh show how easy it is, and I trail along with the rest.

Gittin' down there that ganglin' Swede, he takes off up hill on a li'l slidin' trot and then from way up, he starts back down the slope. Whee! Time he's slid a hundert foot he's makin' at least a hundert miles per hour, ridin' the skis straight up, holdin' that li'l pole above his head.

Right close tuh the foot o' that hill there's a rimrock about twenty foot high. When he leaves that, he comes sailin' through the air, way over the feed ground, landin' slick an' easy an' coastin' off toward the crick.

"How's that for a he-man's sport, gents?" he asks when he comes slidin' back tuh where we're all gogglin' at him.

Sport! If that's sport, so's bein' shot outa a cannon.

"O' course," he says, " I ain't much good at this nor is my friend Peterson here. But you husky cowboys, you oughta jump a'most to the crick. Tomorrow me and Peterson we'll come back, and hold a li'l friendly tournyment. Unless, o' course, this jumpin' looks too scary for you boys."

Them cowboys looks at each other, and then Stevie speaks up.

"Scary!" he snorts. "Shucks, I been throwed higher and fu'ther many times by a bronc. We'll be here with bells on waitin' for that tournyment."

Still Stevie an' One-Ton ain't so enthoosiastic about it when Knoot and his friend Peterson, and Muley and Doodlebug Edwards pulls out.

"The only thing you boys got t' watch out for is t' be sure tuh land on your heads instead of your feet," I hooraws 'em.

"Yeah?" sneers Stevie. "I s'pose yuh'd have the nerve tuh jump. Me and One-Ton brung out a extry pair o' skis, but we figgered yuh wouldn't even have the nerve to put 'em on."

"Who ain't got the nerve?" I says t' that. "Yuh never saw me back down from ridin' anythin' with hair on; I'll make it anythin' without hair, too. That jumpin' don't look so hard, not fer a natcheral-born ath-a-lete like I am. If they's any jumpin' done here tomorrer, bet I jump as far as anybody."

That's the kind I am. I'll do anythin' anybody else does an' do it better. I got a natcheral skill for all lines of sport. A man like me—what was bronc ridin' champ at the Sunset Roadeyo for two years runnin', has simply got to be a li'l better than anybody else. A quick mind, nerves of ice, an' muscles of steel: Johnny Hooker has 'em all.

"Where's them other skis?" I says when we git back tuh the house. "An' lemme at that can o' bear grease. No doods or weak-minded cowboys can outjump Johnny Hooker on his own jumpin' ground."

I set that bear taller on the stove tuh heat 'er up so she'll soak in good an' about that time our cook, Old George, rears up.

"Git that golrammed stuff off'n that stove! What yuh take this fer—a glue factory? Git 'er off!" he bawls. "I wish'd it 'ud rain red-hot bricks an' boilin' water till all this snow was gone. Mebbe then this outfit 'ud git outa the house an' go tuh work."

If a feller can't be boss in his own house, he'd better quit, but it ain't no use tuh argue with Old George when he's on the peck, so I takes the grease outdoors and builds me up a good hot fire.

When I put that grease on them skis, she sinks right in, after which I wear out one o' Stevie's socks polishin' them till they're slicker 'n the inside of a gravy bowl. "What yuh want to do," I says to th' boys, when I come back intuh the house, "is tuh go after this on a scientific basis. Yuh boys jest stampede intuh somethin, without layin' back an' studyin' it a while. There's a right way an' a wrong way to learn these here foot sleds tuh neck-rein."

"Yuh jist wait till yuh step up on a pair o' them things," says One-Ton, "an' try t' teach it how tuh neck-rein. I c'n ride anything with a place tuh hang my spurs, but I ain't never had no practise ridin' with both feet up in the saddle."

"What anybody c'n do, I c'n do," I tell them boys.

THAT night I figgers I'll sneak them skis out, and try 'em in the moonlight without no ivory-headed cowboys makin' wise cracks. I see it's up tuh me t' look after the Hooker interests as usual. Chances are that Knoot and his pal has some scheme t' git money outa this tournyment, and me, I intend t' turn the tables on 'em.

After supper I slips out them skis and the pole that goes with 'em, and I head up the crick until I find me a gentle slope.

Climbin' the hill about halfway, I sets down an' begins tuh buckle on them skis, but seems like that you ain't s'posed tuh set down t' put on them things, 'cause when I starts tuh git up they don't act like they wants tuh wait. The snow it's got a slick crust, 'count o' thawin' an' freezin' up. They take me about a hundert foot down the hill 'fore I can grab my breath and some oak brush an' set 'em back on their haunches.

This thing is a li'l harder than I figgered, but all it'll take me t' catch on is some practise, only how kin I git any practise when I don't even git a chance tuh stand up? I figger mebbe I put a li'l too much bear-grease on the runners.

Holdin' on to a bush I start t' straighten out fer another try, when —*whoosh*—we're gone from there. I never saw nothin' shoot away so dang fast as them sleds, but thinkin' quick, I make a grab fer my stick so's tuh put on the brakes. But it's too late; I'm a'ready forty foot off, movin' like lightnin'. An' fast as I move, I ain't movin' quite as fast as my feet. They keep about a yard ahead, an' every time I try tuh straighten up from a squattin' position, them skis put on a extry bust of speed, gainin' a coupla inches.

Bein' quick-thinkin' I see this will never do, but while I'm usin' my scientific head t' figger out what tuh do in a case like this, one of the dang sleds gits ahead o' the other. An' when I yank that one back, t' other jumps intuh the lead, jist like jockeyin' a couple race horses.

Things happen fast after that. One of 'em cuts acrost ahead o' the other, an' in the mix-up I run right up astraddle o' my left foot an' set down, an' from there them dang sleds they starts runnin' in circles, windin' up in a big patch o' brush an' warpin' me agin a stump.

I LAY there quite a while before I c'n git up, but if you think that discourages me, you sure don't know the bulldog grit of Johnny Hooker. No pair o' greased boards is goin' to git the better o' me; I simply takes 'em off an' walk back up hill for another try.

This time I puts 'em on while standin' up, usin' a tree as a snubbin' post, and straddlin' that pole. When I yanks off the blind and lets 'er go, I mean t' say we goes. I'm settin' heavy on that pole 'tween my legs, but even at that, I reckon I make no less'n eighty miles a hour.

That's sixty too fast, but I find I can guide myself by leanin' over one way or another which is quite a help in dodgin' old snags o' stumps. It's allus that way with me; I can learn more in a minute than them two cowyaps, One-Ton an' Stevie, in a week. In no time a-tall, I see I'll be a complete master o' them skis, and hoppin' around a mountain like a bighorn sheep.

I'm wishin' Stevie an' One-Ton is there so's I c'd show 'em how tuh do it when we come tuh the end of the ridge, an' before I know it, dang if I ain't soarin' right off through the air. But stayin' cool, as I take off, I lean a li'l for'ard jist like I seen that Knoot *hombre* do, but I reckon I lean a li'l too much, 'cause my head takes a notion it's goin' tuh beat them skis.

It does, too, for as we sail out over a li'l crick I dives head-fust intuh a snow bank 'bout fifteen foot deep, which is all that keeps me from killin' myself. Landin' kind o' ungraceful that-away, I gits a unholy jolt to my spine an' I'm jist about able tuh crawl outa that bank 'fore I smother t' death. Then I lays quiet a while before I'm able to unstrap the golrammed things and stand up.

I figgers mebbe this is enough fer one night's practise; it don't pay to rush things, an' when I'm able tuh hobble back tuh the house, I does it, leavin' them skis an' stick in a shed.

"Where yuh been, Johnny?" asks Stevie when I come in.

"Where I been?" I says. "I been outdoors figgerin' things over. An' I sorta come to the conclusion that tomorrer at the tournyment I better let you birds do the jumpin', while I stand on the sidelines an' observe yore mistakes and be able tuh give you boys pointers later."

With that I undress myself, and rubs in a bottle of hoss liniment an' eases myself intuh my blankets. It would take a race o' lunkheads like the Swedes tuh think up a mankillin' contraption like skis.

Next mornin' I'm jest able tuh crawl outa my bunk. I make a stab

at workin' while we feed our cattle, an' then Stevie tells Pablo tuh haze 'em down in the lower end o' the field, so they won't be in the way o' the jumpin'.

Soon after this, Knoot an' his spindle-shanked towhead pal arrive on their skis, and then Doodlebug Edwards and Muley Hanks slides in, while quite a sprinklin' of cow waddies ride in from down crick tuh see the fun.

Knoot he explains the rules o' the jumpin'. Yuh got tuh ride 'em straight up on the way down an' not use the stick 'til yuh hit bottom an' want tuh slow up. After which him an' his pardner makes the first run an' jump.

It's mighty handsome the way they sail through the air, but they don't seem tuh be no great shakes at it, and Stevie an' the rest figger they can beat that pair. Muley Hanks is next to take a whirl at it, landin' way out in the feed ground, but he makes the bobble of landin' on one foot, runnin' into the hay corral and loosenin' a corner post.

Doodlebug Edwards he gits sidetracked on a cow trail 'fore he gits down the runway, an' knocks down a lot o' oak brush 'fore he comes tuh a stop, head stickin' in the snow and skis up in the air like a coupla semaphore signals.

Stevie and One-Ton, they do better, lightin' on both feet, but instead of stayin' on'em, they sorta buries their noses in the ground an' plows up the snow an' ice after they land.

Well, that's fun for us lookin' on, an' we raise a cheer. Somebody has brung out a big jug of likker an' passes it around. After it's passed around a few more times ever'body could jist about sail through the air without no take-off.

"What we ought t' do," says Knoot next, "is select two teams an' lay a few small bets."

Here is where I smell something crooked, but them addle-headed cowboys don't. They fall in with this plan, and Knoot an' his friend, they says bein' they're more practised, they'll be on opposite teams so's tuh make it fair, and the bets will be paid tuh one team or the other, which seems plumb fair. They choose their teams, Knoot takin' Stevie an' One-Ton on his, which leaves Muley Hanks and Doodlebug Edwards for the team captained by Ivor Peterson.

"THE rules o' this game," says Knoot, "is that if any member of either team fails to remain on his feet after making the jump he is ruled out and is not entitled to share in the winnings of his team. Now, me, I think I got a pair of champions here in Stevie an' One-Ton so I'll put up fifty dollars. How 'bout the rest of yuh?"

Danged if One-Ton and Stevie don't dig up fifty apiece, and likewise Peterson an' Muley and Doodlebug.

Knoot he asks me to hold stakes an' the likker jug is passed agin, an' by that time Stevie an' them other three cowboys would take on the champ of Norway and Sweden.

There's to be three series o' jumps in all, a third of the total bets bein' paid each time.

The likker sures gives Stevie an' the rest a lot o' nerve, for they come down off'n that hill like slidin' sheep through a dippin' vat. Trouble is, although they land on their feet, they don't stay that way long. That feed ground is plumb icy an' all them pore idjits do is polish it up good with the seat of their pants.

I'm busy payin' the winners, which don't seem tuh be none 'cept Knoot Hanson an' his partner, Ivor Peterson.

It's easy for a scientific brain like mine t' see that one of them expert ski-jumpers is bound to win, 'cause they ain't none o' them cowpokes on

the winnin' team that qualifies by stayin' on his feet.

It makes a cool two hundred dollars which them two takes outa Canyon Lobo when they promise t' come back agin in a week or so an' slides out, wavin' back at us, and hollerin', "Happy landin's."

"Nice fellas, them birds," says Stevie. "An' next time I bet we cash in."

"Wake up," I says. "Them fellers' scheme was so plain a blind man could feel it with his cane, but it ain't soaked into yore dumb skulls yet. There ain't no way yuh boys can win, yuh can't learn to stick on your feet in a few days' practise. All yuh'll do is pay out more cash fer the privilege o' slidin' around over that feed ground on yore left ear. Are yuh goin' t' let them dudes show the Hookers up for suckers? Now lissen t' me.

"In jumpin' we don't stand no more show 'n a Jersey bull at a waterhole. Them boys wasn't extendin' theirselfs today in jumpin'. They even fell once or twicet to make it look they was dubs. Our only chance is a cross-country race. We know this country, and we can fix it up so's to win that money back and more, too."

Them two finally lissens, 'cause they know when Johnny Hooker puts over a scheme it's a good one. All we need to do is practise on travelin' on skis and none of this fancy jumpin'. We find out, fer one thing, we got a better chance in the brush, as brush slows us up like ridin' that stick 'cept it's purty dang tough on pants. We lays out a course through brushy country an' we also pull another trick.

We'll take 'em up on the same ridge havin' that li'l point where One-Ton and Stevie took their headers in the snow, leavin' a plain trail of skis for 'em to follow, an' the two natcherally thinkin' it takes 'em back to the ranch. They'll be zippin' along in the lead, and all a sudden that ridge drops plumb off to nowhere. By the time they pulls theirselfs outa there, me an' Stevie or One-Ton is bound to finish.

For a week we slides around the country, practisin' turns an' we git so we c'n travel right along, an' in fact most of the time too dang fast t' suit me.

When them two experts show up agin, we're ready for 'em. We explain as how we ain't in their class when it comes tuh jumpin', but we wouldn't mind puttin' up a li'l money on a cross-country race.

"Why, o' course," says this Knoot Hanson, tryin' to keep it back how gratified he is.

I pulls out a roll big enough tuh choke a burro which them fellers cover right now. Stevie an' One-Ton goes back in the house an' borrows all the money Old George has got hid away in his sock an' 'fore we git through, them fellers has put up all the money they got an' wishin' they had more. Muley Hanks happens to drop by and we make him stakeholder an' judge.

"The rules o' this here race is simple, fellers," I says. "If one o' yuh two fellers lands on the feed ground fust the money is yores. An' if one o' us three lands fust, the money is ours." Which suits them slickers so good they has to snicker.

WE puts on our skis an' I lead the way up the crick an' pretendin' to hunt a good startin' place, I take 'em a long, roundabout way tuh the ridge we picked out. There's plain tracks startin' down toward the ranch, but them's the one we put as bait. Knoot and his pal put up a howl about there bein' too much brush, but it don't do 'em no good. This is to be a cross-country race an' this is the kind o' country it's t' cross.

After we git our wind back from the climb we all line up for the start. We agrees that when I lets out a bawl we're tuh take off, every devil fer hisself. Them two experts is bent over nearly tuh the ground, with a hump in their back like a bronc on a cold mornin'. Me, I'm feelin' around with my pole fer a rock, or somethin', tuh give myself a big push. Purty soon I'm ready an' I suck in enough wind tuh fill a truck tire.

Then I lets out a beller:

"Let 'er slide!"

I heave back on my pole fer a good start an' dang near overdo it. Time I git straightened up an' straddle o' my pole I'm a hundred yards away an' leadin' the pack, follerin' the ski tracks we made. Purty soon that Ivor Peterson comes whizzin' past me an' the last I see o' him he's still on the tracks which will take him intuh that side canyon.

I take a quick look back tuh see where Knoot is at, an' danged if he ain't bringin' up the drags. Right then I gits wise. Them two ain't so dumb after all as to lead out an' mebbe git lost or land in some box canyon. They arranged fer one of 'em tuh take the lead while the other hangs back 'til he sees he's on the right ride above our ranch an' then he'll come up an' pass us fellers.

I see she's goin' tuh be a shore 'nough race an' turn off at the shortest way home, leanin' forward some more, shovin' intuh high. Right below is a bunch o' oak brush racin' up the slope tuh meet me. Ain't no chancet tuh git around 'em so I mow a swath right down the middle yuh could drive a covered wagon through. That kind o' slows me up so One-Ton an' Stevie comes up an' passes me, but that Knoot feller is still hangin' back, suspectin' a trick.

The ride is beginnin' tuh git a li'l steeper an' them skis o' mine is actin' like they got three speeds for-'ard, an' no reverse. I figger maybe I better put on a li'l more brakes, an' right then she happens. That danged pole o' mine busts right in the middle an' them skis starts stampedin' right down off'n the mountain like a locoed bronc.

"Out o' the way, down there!" I yawls at One-Ton an' Stevie up ahead. "These here things has got the bridle off. Gimme some room."

"Whee! The wind whips agin me like she's blowin' a gale. I trys tuh use the short piece what I held on tuh fer a brake but the crust on the snow jerks it outa my hand an' I set down right between them cussed skis. Ever since, I been sorry they don't put seats in chaps like they does in pants; they ought to be a law about it. Fifty foot o' fast travel and it seems that danged snow has turned red hot, an' there's a sorta smoky smell in the air. That won't do; I got tuh catch up with them skis some way, but ever' time I try tuh raise up they only puts on a li'l more speed.

Finally I puts both hands on 'em right behind my boot heels an' raises about halfway up, which beats standin' 'count o' the wind might o' jerked me plumb out o' my boots.

IT'S at this time I see a patch o' timber shootin' up the ridge tor'ard me. I done fergot all about that timber, an' all I got time tuh do now is pick out a li'l open place an' pray them skis see it, too. I make it through, leavin' part o' my leather jacket hangin' on a snag.

Outa that timber she's all open country an' down slope tuh the feed ground an' them damn' skis shore takes advantage of it. They keep pickin' up speed every jump, but fast as I'm goin', which is three times as fast as any hooman bein' oughta go, that crook of a Knoot Hanson comes slippin' up on me. He sees the far side o' the feed ground

way below, and not needin' a guide no more, he heads straight fer it.

One-Ton and Stevie is still bringin' up the tail of the parade. Knoot's pal he's undoubted been sidetracked but it takes only one man to win, and this Knoot he's headin' for the wire like a red-hot bat outa hell.

He gives me a horse laugh as he goes by, and yells, "Ride 'im, cowboy!" as he pulls intuh the lead.

Looks like Johhny Hooker has pulled a boner, but it's jist emergencies like that what bring the fightin' blood of the Hookers to a boil. Closer tuh us is a li'l point above the feed ground, nearer than the one they been jumpin off of and which Knoot is headin' likety-spit fer now. It's jist enough of a short cut tuh mebbe bring me in a nose ahead and I lean over an' head straight fer it.

Stevie an' One-Ton comes sizzlin' along behind me, yellin' an' whoopin', an' all in a bunch we bust down through a bunch o' oak brush an' run right square intuh a bunch o' li'l aspen trees. We knock down enough poles tuh build a corral an' I run right up straddle of a dead tree that's leanin' down hill. I'm travelin' so fast I trim that tree slicker'n a fishin' pole an' come shootin' off the end of that point tuh land on top of a haystack in one end o' the meadow that we been usin' as feed ground.

Stevie an' One-Ton is alongside an' we knock the top off that haystack an' skin on acrost the feed ground, bustin' two wires on the fence 'fore we come tuh a stop.

"Yuh win, Johnny!" bellers Muley Hanks, the stake-holder. "Yuh win by a neck."

"Yeah, by a broken neck," I states, feelin' of myself for busted bones.

It's right then we hear a lot o' screeches an' we see that ski expert of a Knoot about thirty foot up in the air and we also see what he's yellin' about. Dang if I ain't forgot tuh tell Pablo tuh haze our cattle down in the lower end o' the field, and they're all bunched up right where them boys is used to jumpin' off.

THAT Knoot feller comes down straddle o' the biggest steer in the lot. Which steer, not used tuh havin' Swedes plop down onto him out o' a clear sky, he stampedes off down the field, unwindin' hisself as he goes.

That ski expert he grabs all the hair in sight, but he can't grab enough to do him no good. When that steer unloads him he gives a twist that sends Mister Knoot spinnin' up in the air. And when he starts down head first with them skis turnin' 'round an' 'round, it looks like a windmill in a high wind.

That feller gits up sorta stunned and plumb mad, but what can he say? He's so jarred up, he can't even say, "Happy landin's." When that pardner of his heaves in sight, them ski-boys jist light out down country, plumb disgusted.

Which mebbe saves us a lot o' argyments about how come them cows tuh be bunched up right on the landin' ground while Pablo is settin' his horse down in the lower end o' the field where them cows ought tuh be.

They's even people so lowdown as tuh claim I had told Pablo to bunch them cattle a-purpose right where them fellers would land.

I rises tuh state any folks what would think I would play such a unprincipled trick as that simply don't know Johnny Hooker!

Next Month: A Fast-Moving Novelette of Cowpoke Courage in the Face of Long Odds—GOLDEN GUNS, by Tom J. Hopkins

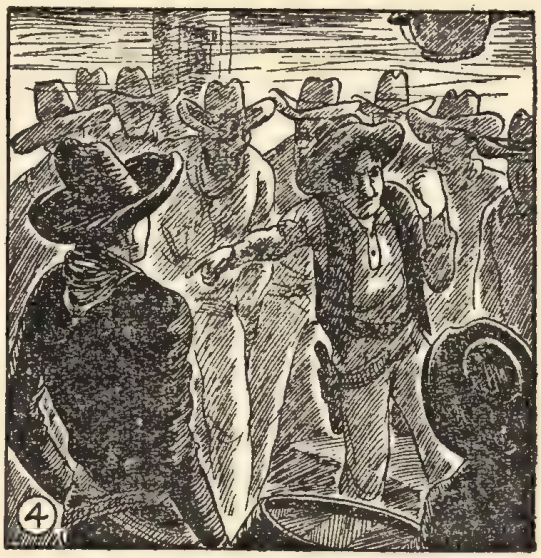
GALLOPING DEATH

A SIX-GUN SANDY ADVENTURE IN PICTURES

"Reckon yo're safe now," Sandy tells an elderly rancher as they reach the mouth of a canyon. "The rider called Galloping Death ain't around." "Thanks, Sheriff," says Seth Gray. Sandy rides away. He whirls in the saddle as he hears a shot! A masked rider is firing at Seth Gray!

"Galloping Death!" shouts Sandy as he fires at the hooded horseman. But he is too far away for accurate shooting. With a thunder of hoofs Galloping Death makes his escape. Sandy sees Gray's limp form hanging from the saddle of his frightened, crazed horse. The sheriff chases after the runaway.

"Dead!" murmurs Sandy as he stops Gray's mount. "An' he's th' third rancher that's been killed by that masked rider. I shore would like tuh know why." The young sheriff ties Gray's body across the rancher's horse and rides back into the little cowtown just as dawn is breaking.



"How do we know Sandy didn't kill Gray himself?" demands Matt Kerry, the town lawyer, when the sheriff tells his story. "What reason would I have?" snaps Sandy. "Gray was my friend." "Yes," says Kerry, "an' he left a will givin' you his ranch." Sandy asks for time to capture the masked rider.

[Turn page]

Reluctantly the crowd agrees to give the sheriff until noon to find the hooded killer. Sandy denies any knowledge of Gray's will. He rides back to the canyon hoping to pick up the trail from there.

"Hoss tracks," says Sandy when he has ridden halfway through the canyon. He dismounts to examine the tracks. "Hoss been standin' here!" Suddenly a rope swishes down from the cliff above!

Sandy grabs at the rope with both hands, keeps it from strangling him as it settles around his neck. But he is jerked into the air. He clings on desperately as he is slowly pulled up the cliff!

"Get me, will yuh!" shouts a hooded figure leaning over the cliff. Galloping Death curses as his gun jams and he is unable to fire. "I'll get a knife!" he snarls. Steadily Sandy is being pulled upward by the masked rider's horse, the rope snubbed around a tree. The outlaw races off to obtain a weapon.

As Sandy reaches the edge, the rope slackens. Sandy is almost hurled to the foot of the cliff, but he manages to get a firm hold and pull himself up. As he does so he glances down and sees a posse coming from town. "Afraid I might try tuh make a getaway," murmurs the sheriff.

Before Sandy can get to his feet the masked rider comes plunging toward him, a wicked-looking knife clutched in his hand. The knife rips the sleeve of his shirt as Sandy leaps to his feet. He has no chance to draw. Wildly the two men fight there on the edge of the cliff like animals at bay!

Sandy ducks and dodges, smashing out with his fists, desperately trying to keep out of range of the knife. Galloping Death snarls with rage as he stabs viciously and with each thrust the young sheriff leaps aside just in time. Sandy's right fist smashes against the masked man's jaw!

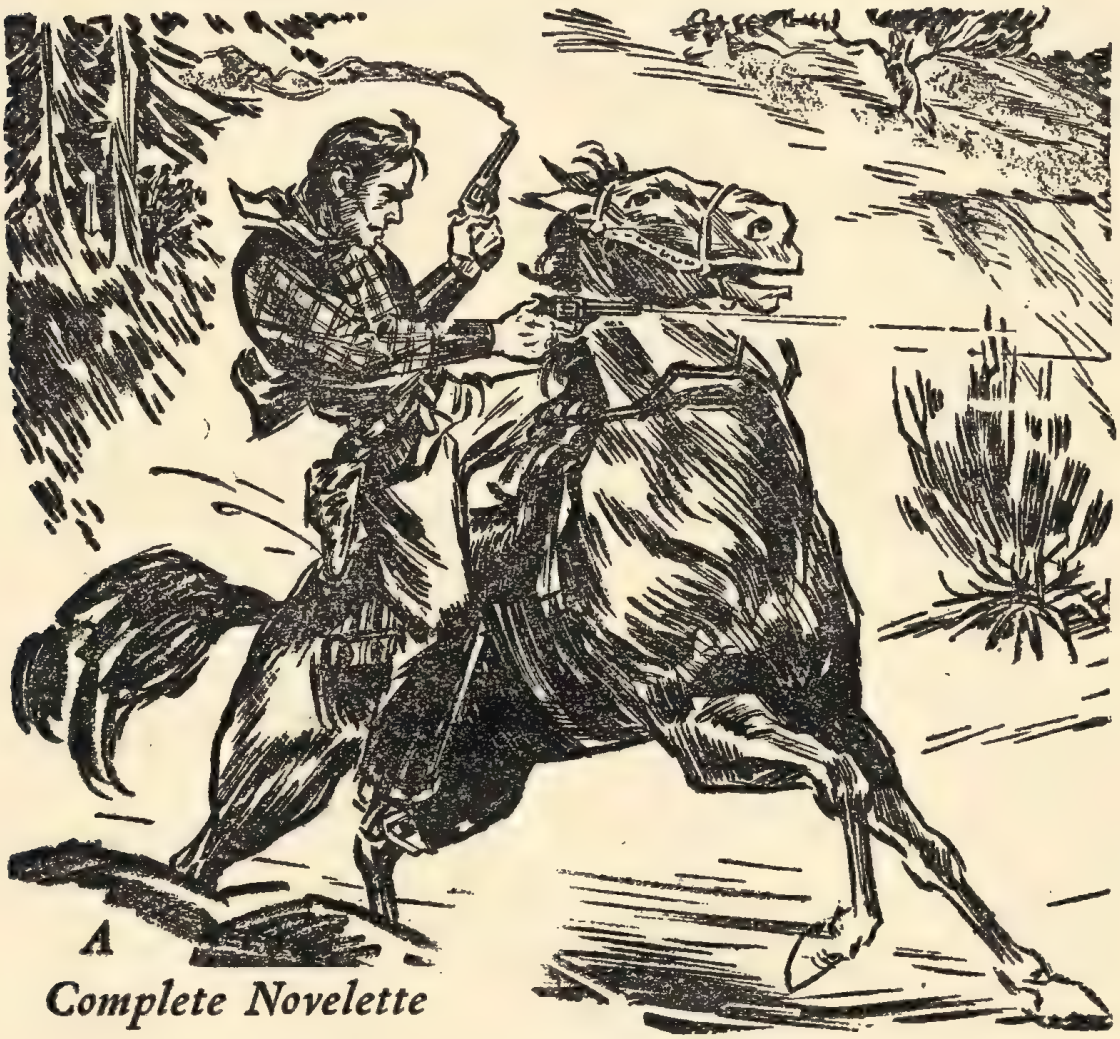
With a stark cry of terror Galloping Death loses his balance and goes plunging over the cliff. Down he goes, his body hurtling through the air—the knife dropping from his hand. He hits the rocks below with a thud while the members of the posse stand motionless in horror!

"Galloping Death!" exclaims one of the posse, removing the hood! "An' it's Matt Kerry!" Sandy slides down the rope. "Tried tuh murder ranchers," confesses Kerry. "Then forge wills—leaving property tuh me. Gray didn't leave Sandy ranch—I lied." He shudders and cashes in, his neck broken.

Next Month: SIX-GUN SANDY in QUICK-TRIGGER LAW

Hell-for-Leather Gunplay in a Gripping Yarn of the Rangeland!

SON *of the*



A

Complete Novelette

CHAPTER I

Death Rides the Stage

RONNIE TURNBOW woke up with a violent headache and a stiffness in his lithe young body. He didn't open his eyes because he had the impression that when he did he would discover something that would be very unpleasant.

He lay on his back and tried to piece together the events of the evening before, but trying to recollect seemed to cause his head to ache more. He remembered that he had been gambling and had lost all his wages to Dill Gailord and old Purvis, both professional gamblers—and probably worse. After Gailord had taken all Ronnie's money, he had surprised the youth by offering to take his I. O. U.s for more. And he had bought plenty of whiskey with his winnings.

Ronnie heard a clanking sound that came from close to him and sent his head throbbing worse. He recognized that sound. To the son of the sheriff, there could be no

Ronnie Turnbow Dashed Headlong into

SHERIFF

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

Author of "The Marshal from Mustang," etc.

The fugitives bulwarked themselves behind the threshing bodies of their horses

doubt about the sound of jail keys being grated harshly across the steel bars. It was like a boy running a stick along a picket fence. Except that it was louder—a thousand times so.

The youth opened his eyes and saw that he was in a cell, and he saw Bud Pounds, his father's old deputy, standing outside.

Ronnie sat up on the jail bed while Pounds opened the cell door. He looked at the deputy with a headachey, rueful grin, then got to his feet and started out. This wasn't the first time they had put him back of the bars to sleep off a drunk and to have him there so the old man could raise cain with him in the morning. He staggered out of the cell.

"Mornin', Bud," he greeted. "Ol' man waitin' to put me over the coals?"

He started automatically toward his father's office, and the deputy followed him without answering. Ronnie dropped into a chair when

Trouble—and Met the Consequences Squarely!

he saw his father was not at his desk.

"I get a break," he said. Then he looked at the old deputy in a puzzled manner. "What's the long face for? You look like a funeral?"

The old deputy's usually jovial features were grave, and his face was drawn. He sat down in a kind of weary way at the sheriff's desk and rolled a cigarette before he spoke.

"Ronnie, where was yuh last night?" Bud's eyes were sharp.

"Just around drinkin' a little, an' playin' a few cards. Why? What's the matter?"

"With Dill Gailord and old Purvis?"

THE youth's head drummed and his nerves were on edge, and he became resentful of this personal questioning.

"If it's any of yore business, yes," he snapped. "I was with them."

"Remember everythin' yuh did?"

"Sure. I don't get so drunk I don't know what I'm doing."

"Good. Then tell me everything yuh did last night." The deputy seemed to regret having to ask that question, and it came with difficulty.

Ronnie's quick temper bounded out of restraint. He got to his feet and leaned heavily against the desk, facing the seated deputy across from him.

"Listen here, Pounds, I know yuh'n the old man are good friends, but that don't give yuh no right to pry into *my* private business. See? It ain't no concern of yores where I was last night."

He turned and took a wabbly step toward the door, his face grim with anger. He was going to get an eye-opener.

"Wait a minute!"

The deputy's voice had a surprising new firmness in it that the youth had never heard before. It stopped him and caused him to turn around and look at the man at the desk.

"Ronnie, Dill Gailord and Purvis robbed the Ore City stage last night at Coyote Ford," Pounds said with slow deliberateness. "Yuh was along with them!"

The son of the sheriff looked at the deputy in wide-eyed astonishment. He went back and leaned weakly against the desk and continued to stare. Somewhere in the vagueness of his memory, there seemed to be a picture of his riding toward that wooded stretch of the road during the night.

But he wasn't at all sure because, in spite of what he had told Pounds, he had little recollection of what he had done during the night. Instantly his anger flared up anew at this charge against him.

"Pounds, yuh're a liar if yuh say I helped rob that stage," he snapped.

"I didn't say yuh did. I asked yuh if you remembered bein' with them when they robbed it. I know yuh were there."

The deputy seemed laboring under some very strong emotion. Ronnie Turnbow thought fast. He knew that Pounds was so honest that he would not make a statement that he didn't know to be true. His charge meant that Ronnie must have been at the scene of the robbery. If Pounds said so, it was a fact even though Ronnie did not remember it. His anger at the deputy subsided somewhat when he realized the seriousness of his predicament.

"I'm sorry, Bud," he apologized. "If yuh know I was there, I'll take yore word for it. But, honest, I don't remember robbing a stage. Did I do that?"

"There's plenty of evidence yuh did. There was some of the mine payroll money in yore pocket when we found yuh. And yuh was asleep near where Purvis blowed the express box. He's an old dynamite

man from the mines—was before he went bad. Yuh're mixed up in it deep, even if yuh was drunk. Mebbe Gailord figgered on gettin' yuh in on the deal so's yore paw wouldn't bear down too hard on him if he was caught. Yore dad would be in a fix havin' to prosecute yuh."

Ronnie Turnbow leaned weakly against the desk and gave himself up to bitter remorse. He had been making a fool of himself for a long time, in spite of his father's warnings. And now he had gone so far as to put his father in a difficult dilemma. The old man couldn't catch Gailord and Purvis without suffering the disgrace of seeing his own son in the net.

"Pounds," he said with an eagerness that begged for relief, "I've been a blamed fool, but I'm through. If the old man will get me out of this, I'll promise—"

"He can't get yuh out of it."

Ronnie leaned across the table, clutching it nervously.

"Why?"

"Yore dad's dead! He was killed by a bullet from yore gun in the course of the robbery. He was guarding that payroll!"

CHAPTER II

The Web of Evidence

BENUMBING coldness seized Ronnie Turnbow and held him in its agonizing grip. He stared dumbly at the deputy while the latter walked over and looked out the window, his hands gripped behind him, taut with emotion.

Slowly the significance of that statement sank in on the unhappy youth. According to the evidence against him, Ronnie Turnbow had participated in a holdup which had resulted in the cold-blooded murder of his own father. Money taken in the robbery had been found in his pocket. He had been picked up at the scene of the crime, his gun used, and he had admitted having been with the men who were suspected of the crime.

Pounds must have been thinking the same thoughts, for he turned soberly to the youth.

"Don't yuh see what yuh're in for?" he said. Admitting, for the sake of argument, that yuh might not have actually helped plan that crime—how could yuh prove that yuh didn't help kill yore own father? Yuh've built up a reputation with yore wildness that will make everybody in the valley believe yuh're guilty—whether yuh are or not!"

Turnbow looked at the officer with new astonishment.

"Yuh don't believe I'd do that, do yuh, Bud?" There was incredulity in his voice.

Pounds shook his head helplessly.

"I don't know. I don't think yuh would plan such a thing—against yore own father. But, yuh didn't know he was going to go along and guard that payroll. Nobody knew it except the mine manager."

A shudder chilled the spare frame of the youth. He gulped a deep breath.

"Pounds," he said with an effort, "I did know he was goin' to guard that money. I happened to run into the old man when the manager was askin' him to go along on the stage. But I didn't hear enough to know when it was to take place. Yuh can believe that or not, but it's the whole truth."

The old deputy seemed to come to a decision as he stared out the window of the dingy office. He hitched up his belt and turned to face the dejected youth.

"Yore dad's death makes me sheriff," he said, "an' yuh can be sure that I'm gonna see that his

killer pays for that crime—no matter who it is! Even if it's yuh. And until I get at the bottom of this thing, yuh're under arrest. Yuh understand?"

The youth was stunned. He shrank back as though the man had hit him a blow in the face.

"Yuh're arrestin' me for murder—for killin' my own flesh an' blood?" It seemed impossible that his father's friend could mean what he was saying.

"Not for murder—at present. But as an accessory to the highway robbery. What comes later depends on yuh."

RONNIE TURNBOW sank weakly in a chair. He buried his head in his hands, and the new sheriff didn't disturb him. Finally he looked up despairingly.

"I deserve it, I reckon," he admitted. "I've been a bigger fool than I ever thought I could be. But I haven't been a criminal, Pounds."

"How do yuh know yuh haven't? It ain't a man's intentions that counts when there's murder done. It's what actually happens. Yuh don't know positive that yuh didn't do the killin', now do yuh?"

Ronnie cringed under the accusation.

"No, I don't know anything about what happened. But I'd sure like to know. I'd give my right eye to find out. But how can I prove I didn't do anything—when I don't even know that much myself?"

Old Pounds was rubbing his chin reflectively.

"That's just what I was tryin' to figure out," he said. "I think I got an idea. Yuh might turn it down—but that's one of the things I want to find out, too, whether yuh will turn it down or not."

Ronnie Turnbow made a struggle to get control of himself.

"I'll go the limit to clear up things—even if I'm the one that turns out to be the guilty party," he said with heat. "But how can I do anything lying in jail? I've got an idea already, but it won't do me much good."

"Yuh're goin' to be out on parole," Pounds announced. "I'm gonna turn yuh out. I may be wrong in riskin' it, but it's my way o' doin' it, an' I'm takin' the responsibility. But yuh've go to promise to do what I tell yuh."

Ronnie looked at Pounds with mingled hope and suspicion.

"What do yuh want me to do?" he asked simply.

Pounds scratched his chin.

"Yuh was hangin' out with Dill Gailord and his bunch, so yuh must know somethin' about who their friends are, about where they would be likely to hole up." The new sheriff stood squarely in front of the youth. "I'm deputizin' yuh to go out an' bring this sneakin' friend in under arrest for killin' yore dad and the stage driver. That's yore job! If you actually think yuh're innocent, yuh'll do it."

Ronnie slowly got to his feet and stood before Pounds, face to face with him. The youth's own clean-cut features were drawn and tight, and there was a hardness in his eyes like flint, a hardness that had never been there before.

"Looks just like the old man did when he was on the warpath," the sheriff thought, fleetingly.

The youth stood there a moment, trying hard to get himself under control.

"I'll do it," he said simply. "Yuh think I've got guilty knowledge, and that I'll stick by Gailord. I don't remember what happened last night, but I'll show yuh that whatever I did wrong wasn't my own fault. If I had a hand in it, I'll take my medicine. But I think I was tricked by Gailord for his own purposes, and I'll go out and bring that skunk in

to yuh. An' I'll bring in Purvis an' the rest of his gang!"

The new sheriff tossed the deputy's star to the youth.

"We'll see," he commented.

Then he went back to the window. His back was still turned when the youth jammed his hat on his head and walked out the office door. His feet clumped down the corridor with an ominous sound, and he slammed the outside door as he reached the street. He was adjusting the buckles of his pair of gunbelts as he went.

Sheriff Pounds watched his retreating form until it was out of sight around a corner. He twisted his cigarette to pieces with a hand on which the muscles stood out in hard ridges.

RONNIE TURNBOW had gone to sleep on the jail cot an irresponsible youth; he walked out of the jail a man—with the shadow of his father's death hovering over his young shoulders.

He went down the street with a determined tread, bent on getting to the livery stable as quickly as possible. But without turning his head away from his path, he observed a current of subdued movement in the town that hastened his steps. Hard-faced men talked together in low tones, then dropped into the hardware store with a forced casualness, to come out again with pockets that bulged with shapes which suspiciously resembled the pasteboard boxes that pistol shells came packed in. They drifted away, to reassemble later.

Turnbow made his way to the stable and got his horse. Back of the feed barn a group of men were squatting in clusters, others tightening cinches. All of them were stern-faced, restless, waiting.

A posse was forming, a group of men who had known and respected the late sheriff, and who did not want to embarrass the new one in the performance of a duty he wouldn't like—that of defending a prisoner against a mob. They would see that justice was done without the risk of Dill Gailord's crooked lawyer friends in the county seat finding a way to frustrate them.

Ronnie Turnbow mounted and headed his animal out of town in a direction out of danger of the posse seeing him and asking him to join—to lead them, perhaps, since it was his father they were out to avenge. He stroked his horse's neck.

"It might be me they're after," he said bitterly. "They can have me—but not before I settle my little affair with Gailord."

Out of town and over the brow of a hill, Ronnie broke the animal into a steady lope across the sun-baked prairie. The morning was hot, and liquor boiled out of him. In an hour's hard riding his head was cleared and he was feeling stronger. He kept up the pace his animal had set until late in the afternoon.

He was entering the mountains now, high land that surrounded the valley like the rim of a bowl. It was here he knew Gailord's men had a hideaway where they gathered, a shack kept by a half-breed Mexican who made *tequila* for men who wanted to pass the time secure from the curiosity of the outside world.

Before the hills swallowed him up, Ronnie turned his horse about on the rise of ground and looked back over the sun-scorched valley he had just traversed.

Then he saw the posse—long miles behind him, but moving in a slow cloud of dust in the same path he had taken. So those men had also decided to look for the stage robbers at Mexican Joe's place!

Ronnie turned his horse back toward the uplands and rode another hard hour. Then he came to a low adobe shack hardly noticeable against

the hillside. Outside the door he threw bridle reins over his animal's head and walked straight up to the opening.

Inside there was silence. Every step he took was an invitation to murder, for a man in the darkened interior could have shot him down without being seen by the man in the sunlight.

Ronnie Turnbow walked straight up to the door and entered without knocking. His hands hung down easily at his sides; his hat was clamped down over his eyes. Entering the room, he was blinded by the sudden darkness for a moment.

He stepped inside and to his right until he was no longer outlined by the open door frame. There he waited, thin-lipped, until he could see about him.

Four men sat around. Three were at a table strewn with playing cards; two others across the room from the players, leaning back in rawhide-seated chairs that were balanced with their backs against the wall and their legs in the air.

Turnbow saw Dill Gailord sitting at the table, a hand of cards gripped in his fingers and a cold, expressionless look on his face. Old Purvis sat across from him. The men across the room seemed indolent, but they had Ronnie whipsawed. He could not shoot in two directions at once if the necessity arose.

The air in the room was tense, stuffy and hot. Nobody said anything for a long period. In a dark corner a cricket chirped—an omen of good luck.

Turnbow stood on his toes, lightly, breathing regularly. Gailord was like a steel spring, too tightly wound, ready to release at the slightest movement. His face was a frozen, lifeless mass, but there was a brain back of it as sharp as the blade of a razor. Old Purvis did not seem to see the newcomer.

Then the youth spoke, in a voice that was low and controlled.

"Yuh know my old man was on that coach last night?" There was a slight rising inflection in his voice.

"So I heard." Gailord's voice was lifeless, like that of a gambler calling a bet. There was something about it like the velvet softness that covers the claws of a cat.

"And," the youth continued, "yuh left me there by the ford for the law to pick up after yuh killed him."

"Are yuh sayin' I killed him?"

"I'm sayin' yuh was the ringleader of it."

"That's different, but yuh're still wrong. I wasn't the ringleader of that job — and I didn't kill the sheriff."

"Then who did?"

"*You* did!"

TURNBOW seemed a little wabbly on his toes, but there was no change of expression in his face.

"And I say that I didn't have anything to do with it. I was drunk—on liquor yuh fed me. I've got no way of knowing whether it was doped or not. And yuh left me there to take the fall."

There was scorn in the youth's charge, but no excitement.

"If a man can't look out for himself that's his hard luck," Gailord answered him coldly. "I don't wait around to be picked up by a posse—even when I'm working on a job for yuh."

Ronnie Turnbow's muscles were like the tendons of a leopard. The man before him was deliberately insolent in his callous answers, goading him on to make the first move for his gun.

The silent men sitting around the walls had Ronnie surrounded, waiting for the first overt act. They were tense, nervous. One of them was cleaning his fingernails with a knife. He dropped it and it fell

to the floor and they all jumped. Somebody chuckled almost inaudibly —from sheer high tension.

They were all waiting, waiting. The tension was becoming unbearable.

"Gailord, yuh know I didn't have anything to do with that job," Ronnie said evenly. "Yuh roped me in on it."

"Yuh'll find out different—if the law ever gets hot on the trail," Gailord answered.

Ronnie was more tense now.

"Gailord, the law won't have the chance to get on yore trail," he said. "I'm going to take yuh in to the law."

The ghost of a cold smile flicked across the gambler's face, then vanished.

"No, yuh're not," Gailord said flatly. "Yuh ain't a idiot. Yuh ought to know I got plenty of evidence to prove it was yore idea. An' yuh know I'll use it if there is ever a case made outa this. I don't let my bosses give me any run-around. When I help yuh with a job, yuh're gonna stand by me—whether yuh like it or not."

"Yuh're a liar!"

That was a signal for a showdown.

Turnbow stood poised, waiting for the man to draw first. But the gambler, for the first time since Ronnie had known him, did not grab for his weapon at that insult. Instead, he turned his head sharply—listening.

He looked at one of his men sharply.

"Horses!" he snapped. "See who it is."

The man stood well within the shadow of the window and looked out excitedly.

"Posse!" he yelped. "They got us sure as shootin'!"

The man scrambled back to his chair and grabbed the rifle that leaned against the wall. The tension broke. The men poured out of chairs and looked out, then readied weapons.

Ronnie looked out the window. A posse of horsemen had got within a hundred yards of the house and they had scattered out fanwise, dismounted and were creeping toward the gaping front door of the adobe shack. There must have been fifty of them.

Gailord's sarcastic voice rose above the confusion in the room.

"Looks like they got yuh in a compromisin' position again, don't it, son?" he jeered.

The Mexican said something to the gambler in a low tone, then went through the back door into a leanto. Gailord followed him, leaving Purvis and the rest of the men to defend themselves from the posse.

CHAPTER III

A Robber Dies

A SUDDEN fusillade of shots rang out from the group of men who were scattered around three sides of the adobe shack. Bullets whined and pinged into the walls and ricocheted from the iron stove. One of the men inside grunted and fell against the wall, then slumped lifeless to the floor.

The men outside were more a mob than a posse. Their fury at the murder of the sheriff and the coach driver was mob fury, and they set about wiping out the trapped bandits with no thought of demanding their surrender. Blood was to be paid for with blood. Their steel bullets ripped the hut like a rifle target.

Ronnie Turnbow backed into the corner for a moment. Bullets whined about him. His guns stayed in their holsters, however.

Caught between the posse on the outside and the bandits on the inside he was in a serious dilemma. He was one of the robbers, and as

such he could expect no mercy from the mob outside. But on the other hand, he was a deputy sheriff and he had promised Pounds that he would bring in the man who was responsible for the robbery.

Death furnished another angle to his problem. It was working its way into the door. That mob would keep up its fire until the last man in the shack was dead—and ask questions later.

The youth's face set grimly. He was not afraid of death. But he wasn't ready to die yet. He had to right the wrong he had done the reputation of his father. Without clearing his own name of this crime, he would die leaving a stain on his own father's reputation.

Dill Gailord and the breed had disappeared through the back door into the leanto which filled the narrow space between the back of the shack and the steep out-bank side of the hill against which the house sat. One of the bandits was already dead with a bullet in him. Purvis and the other one of the Gailord quartette stood back in the dingy room and tried to return the fire of the mob. Their faces were grim, for they knew that they were facing death, that nothing but their own guns could save them—and that only by an extraordinary miracle.

RONNIE TURNBOW had no intention of turning his guns upon the men outside, though they were under the influence of mob hysteria, for they were law-abiding citizens, trying to rid the country of crime, regardless of the right or wrong of their method. On the other hand, Ronnie could not get the drop on the men on the inside and turn them over to the mob. To do that would be for an officer of the law to hand his prisoners over to an unlawful death.

The bullets from the outside solved the problem. The two desperate men tried to answer the shots from the mob with equal fury, and in doing so they exposed themselves recklessly. Ronnie saw them fall one at a time. One of them got a bullet in his forehead and stretched out dead.

Purvis squirmed on the floor, with his shoulder broken and his gun knocked across the room. He writhed in agony and, flat on his back, looked at Ronnie appealingly.

"Get us out o' here," he begged, "or we'll both be dead in a minute."

"It looks like we don't get out," Ronnie answered.

Purvis tried to scramble to his feet, and discovered that another bullet had penetrated his leg. He fell down as the leg gave way under him.

"Sure we can," he gasped. "We can go the way Gailord went. I know how he got away—the dirty double-crosser."

Ronnie sprang at the man. Here was a chance to do something.

"Quick!" he snapped. "How do we get out?"

"There's a trap-door in the wall of that leanto. It's the mouth of a tunnel that leads under that out-bank back of the house and lets us out in a corral shed on the other side. There's horses in the corral—if Gailord didn't turn 'em loose just to get us caught and save his own hide."

Ronnie crawled across the room, keeping his head low as he passed the open window, through which bullets were pouring. He lifted Purvis. He half-dragged, half-carried him out through the back opening into the dingy plank leanto, a built-on room less than half a dozen feet square.

"Why didn't yuh tell me about this before?" he demanded. "We could have left with Gailord."

"He would have killed us for following him. We was afraid to un-

til he give the word. We was supposed to cover his retreat. The dirty wolf left us here to die!"

Ronnie saw nothing resembling an exit from the room.

"Let me reach that meat hook over there on the wall," Purvis said.

Ronnie supported the man while he hobbled to the wall and grabbed the meat hook. He thrust it between the crack separating two of the wall boards and twisted it.

"Works like a key," he explained.

Then he shoved on the outer wall. Ronnie saw it move like a door, and gave a hand at pushing. Behind them the bullets whined more furiously. The mob was rushing the house.

The door was surprisingly heavy, but it swung open on well oiled hinges. Ronnie looked through and was greeted by the clay walls of a darkened tunnel. He helped Purvis inside and swung the door back into place, leaving the tunnel in complete darkness.

"There's bolts on this side," the man said. He groped around the edges of the door, and Ronnie heard iron bolts slipping into place. "That leanto wall, which is really the door to the tunnel, is four inches thick and seasoned oak. Them men won't be able to get through for an hour, even if they had axes."

Ronnie breathed deep relief. The side of the hill through which they were penetrating left no way for the possemen to get to the other side without riding a mile or more to the left or right and going clear around the hill. If there were horses at the farther end of the tunnel, the possemen could be given the slip. Ronnie could get at least one of the bandits to jail.

The youth put an arm around the wounded man and groped his way forward. The tunnel took a sharp turn in two places, one to the left and another to the right, but he guided himself along it by keeping one hand on the dripping clay walls.

Finally he saw narrow slits of light, and in a moment he was opening another door. Then he found himself in a saddlehouse that was built against the side of the hill—the side opposite the angry posse.

"There's horses," old Purvis said, opening the saddlehouse door. "We can git away, all right. And when I see Dill Gailord he's gonna learn about leavin' me to swallow bullets for him. And I ain't forgettin' yore helpin' me—"

RONNIE TURNBOW fingered the deputy's badge in his pocket, brought it out in his hand.

"I got to tell yuh, Purvis," he started, "that I'm now—"

"Listen!" the other interrupted him.

Ronnie listened. The sound of firing had ceased while they were in the tunnel. But now he heard another ominous sound, heavy thumps, coming at slow, regular intervals from the tunnel back of them.

"They got a log to ram that oak door with," Purvis said weakly. "And ain't that horses?"

Ronnie heard muffled shouts and the clatter of hoofs.

"They're some of 'em gonna ride around the hill and others are comin' through," the bandit said. "Le's git goin'!"

Ronnie picked up a lariat from the floor of the shack and stepped out into the corral. In a moment he had it around the neck of a sleek, muscular pony. He tied the animal to the poles of the corral and started to open out another loop.

He heard the thump of a falling body in the shack and ran back. Old Purvis lay on the floor with blood running out his mouth. His shoulder wound had been close enough to his lungs to cause a hemorrhage.

Ronnie stooped over him and saw a bloody froth on his lips. The old

man was dying. His eyes were closed, but he heard Ronnie's steps, and he reached out and touched him.

"That's all for me, kid," he said, in a voice that was so low that Ronnie could hardly hear. "Stoop over, I want to tell yuh something."

On his knees, Ronnie lifted the old man's head and wiped the froth off his mouth with his bandanna.

"Yuh done what yuh could to save me when that rat Dill left us all to get killed," Purvis gasped. "Go get him, kid, and kill him. He was framin' yuh all along!"

Ronnie questioned the old man eagerly, desperately, for fear he would die before he told his story.

"Tell me all about it, Purvis. I didn't do any of that killin', did I? I was drunk."

"No, yuh didn't do nothin'. Yuh was full o' doped liquor. Dill hated yore old man because he sent him to prison about ten years ago, and he tried to get his revenge through yuh—and make it pay him at the same time. He got yuh drunk and doped so yuh wouldn't know nothin' about what happened and left yuh to be involved so's to disgrace yore old man. He used yore gun. But he done more'n that. He fixed it so's yuh couldn't worm out of it at all."

"How?"

"Them I. O. U.s yuh thought yuh was signin' in the poker game was really letters he writ in yore hand which makes it seem that yuh framed the crime with the connivance of yore dad. When he run out on us a while ago I seen him slip them letters in the drawer of that table in the room—where the posse would find 'em. They probably got 'em now an' are plumb sure yuh was the ringleader of the robbery."

Ronnie Turnbow cursed under his breath. Gailord's revenge for being sent to prison was perfect.

"But that ain't all," old Purvis said, after a coughing spell. "Gailord knowed a posse would chase us here. And while all the men from town was here, we were gonna slip back and clean out the bank. But we won't be along to help him now, so I reckon he's headed there to do it single-handed. He won't have to split with us. An' he'll succeed, too. He's got relays o' horses waitin' clear to the Border."

RONNIE'S face burned with rage at the devilish ingenuity of the revenge scheme. The posse now was in possession of the evidence which would throw disgrace on him and his dead father forever. All the able-bodied men in the town were out on the man hunt, and Gailord would easily top off his plan with the bank robbery.

The thumping on the door at the far end of the tunnel carried loudly through the still air inside, and Ronnie now heard rending sounds as the solid oak yielded at last to the battering ram.

Once those men were through, there was no power on earth that would save Ronnie and Purvis from the vengeance of the mob.

And others were rounding the hill to cut off escape from that direction.

"Go on an' git away before they git here," Purvis mumbled.

"I can't do it, Purvis. I'm a deputy, and it's my job to see that a mob doesn't hang yuh," Ronnie told him.

"Don't be a fool. I'm a goner anyway. Yuh done me a good turn that yuh didn't owe me. Git yoreself out of it till yuh got a chance to prove yuh wasn't guilty."

"No," the youth answered. "That ain't my job right now."

He went to the door and looked out. Half a mile distant was the end of the hill. Ronnie's face went grim when he saw the first of the horsemen rounding it at a mad lope, rifles in their hands. He turned around

again and looked into the barrel of Purvis' gun.

The old man wasn't quite as weak as he had at first appeared.

"Now," Purvis said, with an effort interspersed with coughing, "yuh're gonna mount that horse an' git away. Else I'll kill yuh an' yuh won't have a chance to tell the story I told yuh. Git!"

The splintering sound came louder from the tunnel opening.

"They ain't gonna shoot a man that's flat on his back," Purvis said. "An' I'll tell 'em as soon as they capture me just what I told yuh. They'll want to keep me as a witness, then, so they won't kill me. They'll try to keep me alive, instead."

Ronnie started to say something, but the man cut him short.

"It ain't that I'm riskin' hangin' on account of friendship for yuh," he said. "I want to stay alive long enough to see Dill Gailord dead. Git, before I shoot yuh."

Ronnie thought fast. There was nothing he could do to help Purvis, but he would lose everything if he stayed. And Dill Gailord was headed for town to make a surprise swoop on the bank—and perhaps to kill a few more innocent people.

"Thanks, Purvis," Ronnie said. "I'll do what I can for yuh."

He ducked out the door and ran toward the unsaddled horse. The mounted section of the posse was within a quarter of a mile of him now. He flung himself on the animal bareback and dug his heels into the wiry flanks. The horse lowered his head and darted out of the corral like an arrow from a long bow. Ronnie leaned low over the animal's neck.

Shouts rose behind him. Then bullets whined around him, followed by the echo of Winchesters. He stabbed his mount's flanks harder and clung to the rope that encircled his neck. Bouncing bareback on the unsaddled, unbridled streak of horseflesh, he slapped the animal's neck and guided him toward the valley across which lay the town.

CHAPTER IV

The New Sheriff

RONNIE pounded the last ounce of speed out of his animal. The shouting mob behind him fired recklessly and with poor aim from the backs of their galloping horses.

Gradually a spark of hope arose in Ronnie's breast as step by step the wiry little animal widened the distance between himself and the tired horses that had already made the grueling run from town. The mounted half of the mob was being left behind for the moment.

The ride was unmercifully hot and dusty, the soft dust surrounding the youth like a sticky cloud that clung to his sweat-soaked face and clothes and filled his nostrils to the point where he could hardly breathe. The long miles dragged by with a slow, monotonous rhythm that kept time to the muffled pounding of the animal's feet in the dust. Time seemed endless, and the wide valley seemed a boundless sea of dried grass.

But finally the low roofs of the town came into view and Ronnie took a deep breath. If he were only not too late; and if he could do something before the mob overtook him—If not—that would be the end.

His horse heaved and panted, pushed forward only under the relentless pounding of the rope end in Ronnie's hand. The valiant animal was wind-broken past all chance of his ever being fit again. It was a shameful end for such good horseflesh, but there was nothing else for him to do.

Ronnie entered one end of Main Street, the dirt road that contained

the lone handful of buildings of the town. The street was deserted, the doors of the stores closed. Grimly Ronnie knew why — the population was out trying to put a rope around his neck.

The bank was at the far end of the street. Ronnie started for it just as a fusillade of shots rang out in the building—still two blocks away.

Just as he passed the jail, Ronnie's faltering horse stumbled in his exhaustion and fell. White foam ran from his mouth and his tongue hung out and was coated with dry dirt where it lay in the sand.

Ronnie slid from the animal as he went down and landed running.

Bud Pounds' horse was at the hitch-rail in front of the jail. Ronnie jerked the slip knot of the reins and flung himself aboard. Down the street the harsh jangle of the alarm bell over the door of the bank filled the air and mingled with the roar of shots.

Ronnie spurred forward, leaning over the new horse's neck. A cloud of dust enveloped him. His heart sank. He might be too late.

THEN he saw two figures run out of the bank, a block ahead of him now, and dart toward the pair of horses standing at the edge of the sidewalk. One of them carried a pair of saddlebags in his left hand and a smoking Colt in the other.

They were Dill Gailord and the half-breed. They vaulted aboard their animals and wheeled them about. Gailord stopped long enough to throw another volley of pistol fire into the bank through the door. Sporadic shots answered him. He turned his animal down the road and beat him with a quirt. The breed followed him. They were on fresh horses.

Then Ronnie beat his mount as he had never whipped an animal before in his life. It settled down to a race to the nearest of Gailord's relays, Gailord ahead, Ronnie in the middle, and somewhere behind him, a posse that was chasing him.

Four miles of galloping hell, sweat and dust-filled air that cut the lungs like acid. Ronnie gained, for the sheriff's horse had a reserve of power that was not possessed by the hastily selected animals of Gailord and the half-breed. Ronnie clattered up to within firing distance.

He triggered his weapon half a dozen times and finally brought down both horses ahead of him. It was the only way he could stop the pair.

Gailord and the Mex landed on their feet and bulwarked themselves behind the threshing bodies of their horses. Ronnie rode to within fifty paces of the pair before their guns hit the sheriff's horse in a vital spot and the animal somersaulted to his death. Ronnie sailed over the animal's head and landed on his hands and knees a dozen feet from their blazing guns.

Both his weapons came out, and Ronnie scrambled to a crouching position triggering them. His nerves went cold; he became a mechanical thing without caution or fear. Here before him was a pair that had to be destroyed, and there was nothing else in the world that made the least bit of difference.

He had the sensation of something thumping into his body, but his mind registered nothing of this, registered nothing at all except the urge to wipe out these men in front of him.

Dust and the roar of guns became intermingled in one short moment of inferno. Ronnie was running forward, vaulted to a standing up position on the ribs of one of the fallen horses, and emptied his guns at the villainous pair hidden behind the breastworks of horseflesh. He was like some avenging devil veiled in a cloud of sulphurous gunsmoke.

When the dust and smoke cleared away, there were three men lying on

the ground with their faces up to the sun. That was the way the fifty-man posse found them, half an hour later.

THERE was a gap in Ronnie's mind from the time he started firing at Gailord. He regained consciousness on a cot in the jail office. Bud Pounds, the new sheriff, was lying on another, also looking like a white-bandaged mummy. There was a committee of a half dozen of the possemen, and the county judge, in the room. They saw that Ronnie was eyeing them wonderingly.

"Kid," the judge said. "Yuh done yoreself proud. Shore got the old Turnbow blood in yuh, all right. And since Bud, here, thinks he's too old to take yore dad's place, looks like it's up to yuh. A kid that can clean up a plot against him like yuh did—well, he ain't a kid no more, he's a sure-enough, real, sheriff-caliber man."

Ronnie lay on his back and thought a minute. "What about that prisoner I left out there at the breed's? They didn't hang him?" he asked.

"No. He beat 'em to it. He lived long enough to tell 'em what he said he told yuh; then he died. Best thing for him. But yuh shore made a friend out o' him."

Ronnie Turnbow felt the great nervous exhaustion leave him, and he slipped into a deep sleep. The judge pinned the sheriff's gold badge on his bloody shirt, and the little group tiptoed out of the office.

Pounds, lying on the other cot, looked at him and smiled.

"I forgot to tell him he wasn't under arrest any longer," he mumbled to himself. "But I reckon that can wait till he wakes up."

Then he, too, went to sleep.

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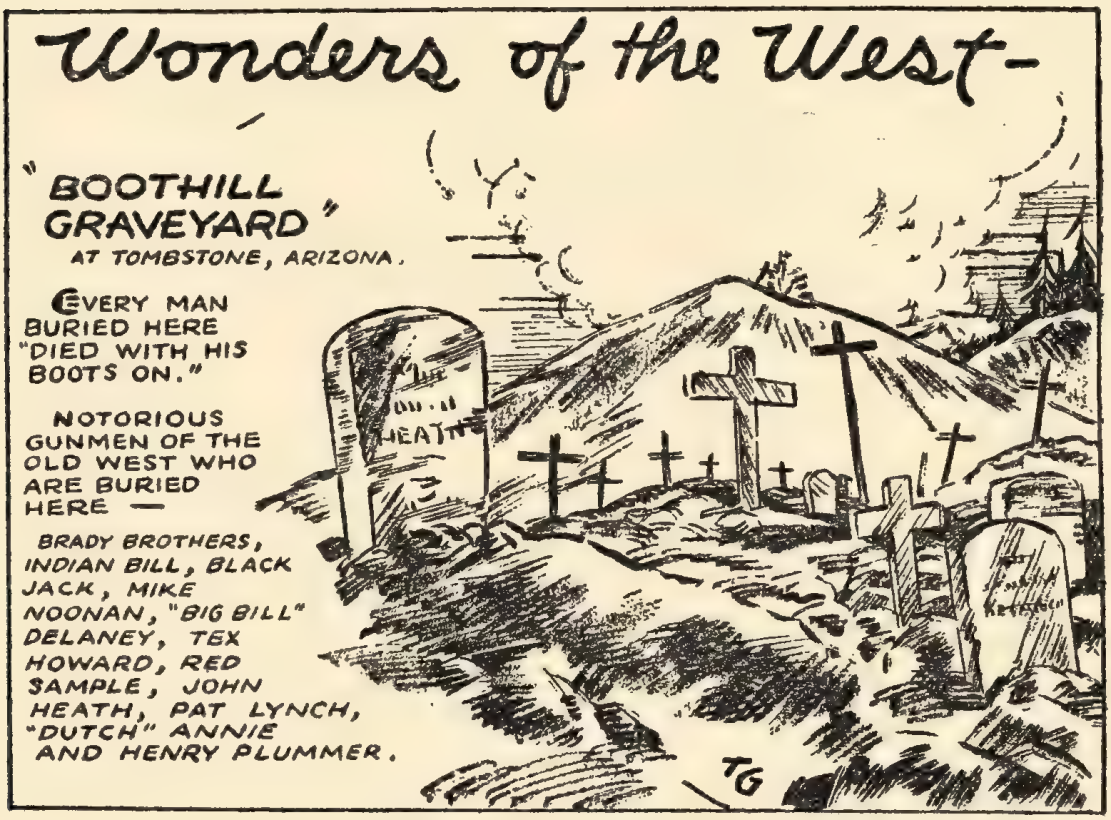

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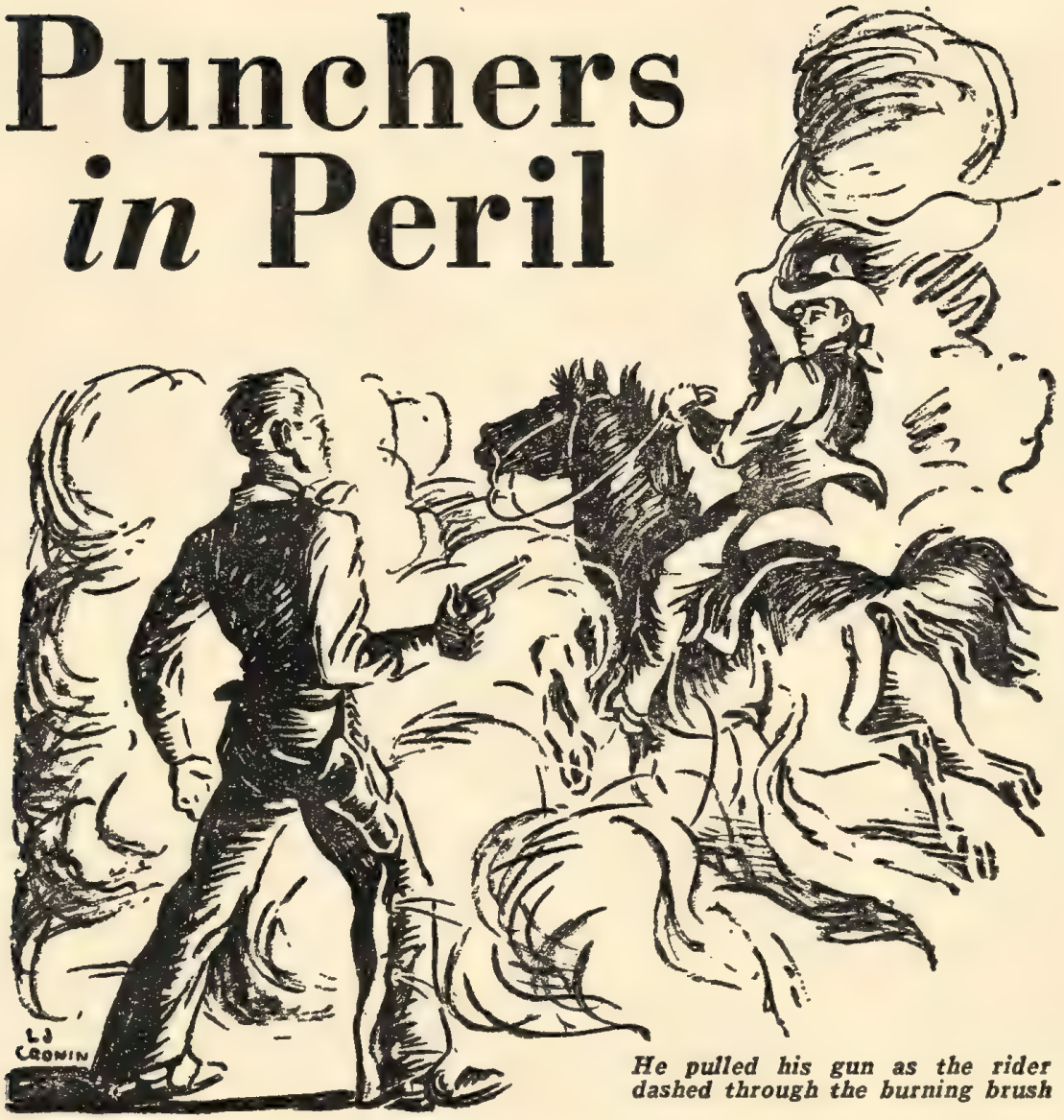


He pulled his gun as the rider dashed through the burning brush

When His Saddle Sailed Out from Under Him Young Len Altrane Was Headed for Some Mighty Fast Action!

By CLIFF WALTERS

Author of "Bogged Down," "Shorty Plays His Chips," etc.

LARIAT double half-hitched around the horn of his new sixty-dollar saddle, whirling loop swishing the air above his head, Len Altrane shot his fleet sorrel within throwing distance of the hard-running steer. Snakelike, the loop hissed out, circled the animal's head without touching either horn, and the experienced sorrel, front feet braced wide apart, tensed himself for the inevitable jolt.

The steer hit the end of the rope. Leather creaked—and things happened.

Both saddle and rider were jerked from the back of the stationary sorrel; both landed ten feet away in a clump of sagebrush, the surprised rider kicking his boots free of the

stirrups. Yet, the lithe Len had hardly landed when, with the agility of a cat, he was again on his feet and watching the steer dragging his new saddle through the rocks and sagebrush.

But already two other LF punchers were hot on the trail of the vanishing steer, their lariats whirling. Soon they returned to where Len was standing, Charley Dade carrying the badly scuffed saddle. By this time, all the riders had dropped the herd to surround Len.

"What the dickens happened?" inquired Baldy Jones.

"I'm wonderin' the same thing." Len grinned sheepishly. "I sure took a purty—"

He stopped, relieved Dade of the saddle and bent over to examine it.

When he looked up again his grey eyes focused intently on the grinning face of young Claude Clevenger, whose uncle, Scotty Shaw, owned the far-flung LF outfit.

"So that's the big joke, is it?" he asked. "Yuh cut my short latigo half in two, and then hang around waitin' for me to tie onto a thousand pounds of gallopin' steer?"

"That sure was funny, too!" Clevenger burst out laughing.

"Yeah, wasn't it?" Len countered mirthlessly. "My new, sixty-dollar cack all skinned up, to say nothin' of the side of my head."

Clevenger glanced about at the group of silent, stony-eyed punchers.

"What the devil's the matter?" he demanded finally. "Can't yuh take a little joke?"

"Little joke!" Baldy Jones snorted. "I seen a feller killed that way once!"

"Sure, I can take a little joke," Len said evenly. "We've all took yore jokes since yuh trailed north to roost with yore uncle, Clevenger. Now, just for a change, I'm goin' to see if yuh can take one."

Len had little use for this nephew of old Scotty's—nor had the other LF punchers. Clevenger was nearly useless on the range. He was far more at home around the gaming table in Whirlwind, palling with Deck Gorse, the tinhorn gambler.

Hardly were the words out of Len's mouth when, jerking off his hat, he threw it under the high-lifed grey the other was riding. There followed a whistling snort, and the grey, soaring into the air, sunfished, swapped ends—and hurled his rider headlong into the dusty trail.

CLEVENGER grunted, then scrambled to his feet. Now, face livid with rage, he eyed Len for an instant—but only for an instant—and lunged, swearing as he came, toward the cowboy.

Clevenger was the huskier of the two—and mad enough to fight a grizzly. Yet all his bellowed wrath didn't cause the grim-jawed Len to retreat. He coolly sidestepped, ducked a wild swing, and planted a blow on the side of the face that spun his raving antagonist halfway around.

That spin was unfortunate for Clevenger, for his revolving body seemed to bring the point of his weak chin into direct, and disastrous, contact with Len Altrane's right fist. Knuckles popped as the bigger man emitted another grunt and went sprawling again to the earth.

"Hey!" boomed out the voice of Scotty Shaw, who now came spurring down the sidehill toward the scene. "What's goin' on here?"

He pulled his mount to a halt, looked down upon his fallen nephew, then turned to glare accusingly at Len.

"Just a little joke," the tall young puncher replied.

"Joke!" the cattleman rasped. "Knockin' a man out cold ain't no joke. Yuh're fired, Altrane!" As he spoke, he brought out the checkbook from his hip pocket.

"Wait a minute, Scotty," Charley

Dade protested. "Yuh don't savvy how this all happened. It was—"

"Never mind, Charley," Len put in, smiling. "Much as I hate to leave the LF, and a bunch of as fine waddies as I've ever rode with, I'd rather leave than have to put up with that pampered pinhead!" He indicated the prostrate Clevenger.

"Pampered pinhead, eh?" the irate Shaw snorted. "He's *my* nephew!"

"Which is yore tough luck, Scotty." An amiable smile still lighted Len's tanned face.

"Here's yore wages," Shaw went on. "What about that bunch of horses of yores? Want to sell 'em to me, now that yuh're leavin', or get 'em off my range?"

"I'll get 'em off," the young puncher replied.

"All right. Get 'em off!" The cattleman turned to his other riders. "Get back to the herd, fellers. I'm stayin' here with Claude till he's able to travel."

LEN patched up the damaged latigo, saddled his sorrel, and jogged his way in the direction of the LF ranch. Arriving there, he packed his belongings on a brown horse that was also his personal property, and resumed his trek. But he didn't head for town, as do most fired cowpunchers. For eight miles he rode northward until he came to a log cabin nestling in a small, grassy swale through which purled a sun-glinting stream fed by the chortling waters of Cowhide Springs.

"Howdy, Orin!" he called to the old man who was shuffling slowly down toward the corral.

The latter stopped, shaded his squinting eyes with his hand and waited for the rider to draw nearer.

"Oh, hello, Len!" he finally called. "Thought I recognized yore voice, but my eyes is gittin' so dang bad—Where yuh headin' for with the pack horse?"

"Movin'," the young man answered, swinging down from his saddle. "Got fired, Orin. And now I've had my mind made up for me. Still want to sell the old homestead out to me for eight hundred—cash?"

"Yep." Elderly Orin Parshall nodded his grey head. "I'll sell out to *you* for that price, Len. But I ain't sellin' out to the LF for any price. Promise me yuh ain't buyin' it for Scotty Shaw?"

"I said he fired me," Len reiterated. "I sure hate to see yuh part with as purty a spot as this is, though."

"Why not?" the other questioned. "When a man's eyesight gits so dog-goned poor he can't see to read brands, and has to sell off his dogies—well—it's about time he was movin' to town, ain't it?"

"Yuh're the doctor, Orin. We'll fix up a bill of sale if yuh say so. I'll hand over the *dinero*, and yuh can move into town any time yuh're ready."

"Which'll be about tomorrow, Len." The old man started poking tobacco into the bowl of his pipe. "Figger to round up yore bunch of cayuses and start that horse ranch yuh've been dreamin' about, eh?"

"Yeah." Len smiled. "It's goin' to be a long drag, but I know I can make it."

"Sure, yuh'll make it!" the other encouraged. "And a year or two from now, yuh'll thank the day old Scotty Shaw kicked yuh off'n his payroll."

"How come yuh never relished the idea of sellin' this place to Shaw?" Len asked.

"'Cause he raised such a ruckus when I first homesteaded it," Parshall explained. "Not that old Scotty ain't a square shooter, but he's bull-headed. Then, to top it all off, he sent that nephew of his'n down to try buyin' me out the last time. When I said no, Clevenger got tough. Tried bluffin' me out, but that didn't

work. I got my old shotgun and told him to vamoose—*pronto!*"

Sundown that evening found Len, jackknife in hand, removing some slim, tightly compressed packets of currency from his red Navajo saddle blanket, the place where he had cached his accumulated wages from time to time. He was signing a paper, and handing the money over to old Orin Parshall when, hearing hoofs, he turned to see Scotty Shaw and Claude Clevenger riding up.

"Who's comin', Len?" the elderly Parshall inquired, again shading his squinting eyes with a bony hand.

"Scotty Shaw and his lovin' nephew," Len replied.

The owner of the LF brought his horse to a stop, and eyed Len for a moment.

"What's the money bein' passed around for?" he asked.

"For this." The young puncher included the cabin, springs and grassy swale surrounding them, in a sweeping gesture.

"Oh, so that's it?" Shaw rasped. "That's how yuh're gettin' even with me for firin' yuh, is it? Buyin' a place that ought to belong with LF range and—"

"Wait a minute," Len cut in. "As long as we're goin' to be neighbors, let's get this straight, Scotty. I've been savin' money for a long time, figgerin' to buy a place to run my horses. I'm not buyin' Cowhide Springs to get even with anybody. I'm buyin' it 'cause I'm footloose now, 'cause it happens to fit my little roll of money, and 'cause this is a free country. I don't hold any grudge against yuh for what happened today."

The displeased cattleman digested this statement for a moment; then he turned hard eyes on old Orin Parshall.

"Old bull-head!" he grunted. "I'd have paid yuh more money than this waddy can. It's just doggoned orneriness that kept yuh from sellin' out to me!"

"Yuh're right, Scotty," old Parshall admitted dryly. "*Yore* doggoned orneriness. But yuh'll have to do yore dickerin' with Len here about buyin' Cowhide Springs. I'm headin' for town tomorrow mornin'. Movin' there."

"I'll give yuh a thousand—cash!" Shaw offered Len.

The cowboy shook his head.

"Twelve hundred!" the cattleman bargained.

"Nope. I'm stayin' right here, Scotty."

"All right—stay!" the exasperated Shaw exploded. "But don't think them cayuses of yores are stayin' on *my* range. Get 'em off there tomorrow!"

"Sure." Len smiled. "Drop in again when yuh're passin' this way, Scotty. And when yuh're alone."

The owner of the LF was apparently too disgruntled to appreciate this neighborly invitation. Growling some unintelligible reply, he beckoned to his glaring nephew and the two of them rode away.

Len watched them until they topped the ridge to the south. There they separated, Shaw heading toward his ranch, and Claude Clevenger riding eastward.

"It don't look like Scotty and his rusty-headed relative's goin' to be none too friendly," old Parshall observed.

Len shook his dark head thoughtfully.

"Nope. Not that I crave Clevenger's company—but I would like to keep on good terms with old Scotty. He's a square shooter, Orin, just like yuh said, even if he does make mistakes like the rest of us."

THE following morning Parshall, having loaded his personal effects in a buckboard, bade good-by to Len and headed across the hills for

the little town of Whirlwind. As soon as he was alone, the new owner of Cowhide Springs saddled his sorrel and rode south for the purpose of rounding up his forty head of horses and getting them off LF range.

However, three of the forty he failed to gather. A bay mare and colt and a black yearling he found dead at the waterhole on the head of Alkali Creek. But it wasn't the alkali in the water that had caused their death. It was bullets. Bullets fired from a .44 caliber six-shooter, as could readily be determined by the five empty shells lying nearby.

A sinister light came to Len's grey eyes as, remembering that Scotty Shaw was the only LF man who carried a .44, he swung out of his saddle and pocketed those five empty shells.

Anger pounding through his veins, the tall young puncher decided to haze his thirty-seven head of horses to the range north of Cowhide Springs, then double back for an interview — and a showdown — with Scotty Shaw.

BUT when he reached his recently-acquired home, Len saw that there was no necessity for riding back to the LF outfit. Scotty Shaw was there. So was Claude Clevenger. So were Charley Dade, Baldy Jones, two other LF riders, old Orin Parshall and Sheriff McQuaine.

Sighting the group collected about his cabin, the dusty Len dropped his bunch of horses and hastened toward his visitors.

"Been waitin' for yuh, Altrane," Sheriff McQuaine announced as the latter rode up.

"What's up?" The young man's steady eyes met those of every man in the group.

"Maybe yuh'd better tell him, Orin," the sheriff said to Parshall. "In the meantime, I'll take a look through his saddle pockets."

Then, while Len Altrane's curiosity mounted, old Orin Parshall explained. Enroute to Whirlwind this morning, he had been held up. A rider, who had kept too far away for the old man's failing eyes to recognize, had appeared on Cedar Flats. He had shot the off horse in Parshall's team; had ordered the old man to toss his wallet, containing eight hundred dollars, out of the buckboard, and had then ordered him to mount the remaining horse and ride on.

"The sheriff here and Scotty—and Clevenger—thinks it was yuh, Len," the old man went on. "They claim it was part of yore plans, to pay me in cash and then rob me. But I told 'em, and I'm still tellin' 'em, it wasn't yore voice that hollered at me."

"A feller can change his voice!" Scotty Shaw argued, glaring at Len. "And he knowed yuh was packin' that money!"

"Yeah?" Len drawled. "And I wasn't the only one that knew it. Clevenger there knew it. So did yuh, Scotty. Yuh both happened along here last evenin' just when I was payin' Orin off."

"They told me about that," Sheriff McQuaine put in. "But they've got good alibis, swore to by them punchers there, that they wasn't within miles of Cedar Flats when this thing happened."

"Yeh!" cut in Charley Dade. "And so's Len there got an alibi. Me and Baldy here seen him headin' for Alkali Crick about the time. Didn't we, Baldy?"

"Sure!" the other replied.

"And, besides," old Orin Parshall continued, "I ain't swearin' out no warrant agin Len. My guess is that Claude Clevenger there had a hand in this robbin' business."

"That's a lie!" Scotty Shaw boomed. "Claude was with me all mornin'—and with Jim and Ed here!"

"Yeah?" Len again drawled, reach-

ing in his pocket to bring out five .44 shells. "And was they with yuh when them three horses of mine was killed this mornin' on the head of Alkali—shot with these shells that fit yore gun, Scotty?"

The owner of the LF stared at the sun-glinting articles in Len Altrane's browned hand.

"What are yuh drivin' at?" he demanded. "Accusin' me of killin' horses on the range? Why, yuh—"

He stopped, his weather-lined face purple with indignation.

"I just asked yuh a question—that's all," the younger man parried. "Them three horses was killed with a .44. And that happens to be the size gun yuh carry."

"Good golly!" moaned the sheriff, scratching his head thoughtfully. "Anything else goin' to happen on this end of the range?"

"Yeh!" old Parshall snorted impatiently. "I'm goin' on back to town. So long, Len. And don't let that Shaw tribe get the best of yuh. And if they kill any more of yore horses —kill them!"

Saying which, the old man walked away toward his waiting horse.

"Huh!" Claude Clevenger sneered. "Len Altrane pro'bly killed them horses himself, Unk—figgerin' to make it look like—"

The lantern-jawed youth didn't finish his conjecture, however, for Len made a quick leap at him, almost succeeding in catching his bridle rein. Clevenger, probably recalling all too vividly what had occurred yesterday, emitted a yell, roweled his mount and dashed away.

Soon all the riders were leaving. But things weren't as they had been before that meeting. Old Orin Parshall was short eight hundred dollars. And it looked as if an ever-widening breach had come between Len and the man whose friendship he valued —Scotty Shaw.

During the next two days Len kept close watch on his horses to see that they didn't trail back to the LF range where they had been accustomed to running. The third day he was dipping down into Soapweed Draw on his way home when, from the head of the deep ravine, a gun roared out, hurling its reverberating echoes along the walls of sandrock.

THE lone rider stopped, hesitated, then veered up the bottom of the draw. Since three of his horses had been killed, he was naturally interested in any promiscuous shooting on the range. Yet, though he wound his way through jutting boulders and tangled mahogany brush for a half-mile, he saw no one.

Finally a dense clump of cedars attracted his attention. He tied his horse and went in afoot to investigate.

Ten minutes later he came out again, a look of mild bafflement on his face. Surely the man who had fired that shot must be somewhere in this walled-in maze of dried brush, rocks, cedar and patternwork of small gulches. But Len wasn't curious enough to conduct an extensive search. He shrugged his broad shoulders, swung again to his saddle and rode back down the draw at a leisurely gait, thankful for the cooling breeze which came billowing up the winding ravine.

Hoofbeats thundering along the trail behind him roused him from his idle speculations. Quickly twisting in his saddle, he stared wide-eyed at three LF riders, Charley Dade, Baldy Jones and Claude Clevenger, who came swooping down upon him with drawn guns.

"Reach for the air!" Clevenger growled, jerking his horse to a sliding stop.

Len still stared curiously.

"What's up?"

"Yuh know what's up!" Clevenger

rasped. Then, to his two companions: "Now don't turn chicken-hearted, just 'cause this back-bitin' *hombre* happens to be a friend of yore'n!"

"We won't." Charley Dade's voice was cool as the breeze. "Friendship quits—when it comes to shootin' a man down for a few hundred dollars!"

"What are yuh drivin' at?" demanded the exasperated Len.

"This!" Clevenger snarled. "Yuh knowed Uncle Scotty'd be fetchin' the payroll out from town today. Yuh knowed he'd be ridin' the cut-off trail acrost Soapweed Draw here. So yuh laid for him. Plugged him and robbed him!"

"Yuh're crazier'n usual!" Len Altrane snorted. "I haven't seen Scotty Shaw since the evenin'—"

"Yeah?" Baldy Jones cut in. "Then where'd yuh get that roll of money that's stickin' out of yore saddle pocket—there on the right side?"

Len looked—and then his mouth dropped open for an instant. Baldy was right. There *was* some currency protruding under the flap of his saddle pocket. Slowly then, and while the three riders still covered him with their guns, the astonished young puncher removed the packet of bills, held them stupidly in his hand and gazed at them.

"Was Scotty—killed?" he asked at last.

"Not quite!" Charley Dade replied, evenly. "But that ain't yore fault, I guess. Yuh plugged him purty bad. And then rode off to let him die. Yuh must've figgered us fellers was ridin' some other part of the range today."

"That's enough powwowin'!" Clevenger interposed. "Grab his gun, Charley. Then yuh and Baldy take him into town and turn him over to Sheriff McQuaine. I'll go back and stay with Uncle Scotty till Jim gets back from the ranch with a buckboard. And listen! If yuh let that murderin' skunk get away from yuh, I'll—"

"Don't worry," Charley Dade answered. "Len Altrane ain't gettin' no favors from Baldy and me. We'll see that he's turned over to the law!"

Spurring his horse alongside Len's, he motioned Baldy Jones to take the other side.

Claude Clevenger whirled his horse and rode back up the draw, while the unarmed Len was started on down the trail, the two stern-faced men riding on either side of him.

"Was Clevenger ridin' with yuh fellers today?" the prisoner inquired as they rode along.

"Yeh!" Charley Dade grunted. "We was still together when we heard yuh shootin' old Scotty!"

"Yuh didn't hear *me* shootin' Scotty," Len denied. "Somebody else shot him. And somebody else planted that money in my saddle pocket." His voice was charged with earnestness. "Yuh're makin' a mistake, fellers. I'm askin' yuh not to take me to town. Come on! Take me back up the draw. We've got to find out who *did* plug Scotty!"

"No tricks!" Baldy Jones retorted, coldly. "It's plain enough to see who—"

AS the three horses crowded close together to negotiate a narrow place in the trail, Len's arms shot out, circled the necks of his two escorts in a viselike grip. The three horses lunged—and three riders toppled from their saddles to land in a struggling, cursing mêlée on the ground. Yet Len's steel-muscled arms never relaxed their hold. Baldy Jones' hairless head was being strained against Charley Dade's cranium, while both punchers bellowed loud protests and reached futilely for their guns.

Finally the broad-shouldered Len succeeded in hooking his spurred boots around the bodies of his straining antagonists. It was then

that his right hand, suddenly releasing Dade's neck, reached out to grab up the latter's fallen gun.

"Lay still or I'll drill yuh—just like I *didn't* drill Scotty Shaw!" Len prodded the barrel of the weapon hard into Baldy's heaving ribs.

"Yuh—win!" gasped the choked Charley Dade.

Len scrambled cautiously to his feet, still covering the two punchers while he seized Baldy's gun.

"Get up, fellers," he ordered, hurriedly. "We're goin' to mount our horses and ride back up the draw. And yuh're goin' to take me to the place where old Scotty is. Ride fast —and don't look back!"

The two LF riders took one look into those flashing grey eyes — and obeyed.

LEN, crowding the two riders ahead of him, saw them jerk their horses to a stop as they rounded a sharp point near the head of the draw.

"Look!" Charley Dade hissed.

Len did look. He saw Claude Clevenger, in that brief instant, standing above the prone form of the wounded Scotty Shaw.

Clevenger was pointing a gun at his helpless relative.

"Don't—kill me!" Shaw's anguished voice could be heard pleading.

Len, taking the situation in at a glance, yelled out a lusty, "Hey!"

Clevenger whirled, firing at the three men who had ridden up on him. A bullet whined past Len's head. But only one. The young puncher's gun was already roaring, spurting its leaden slugs at the man who was trying to scramble into the protection of some cedars.

Clevenger didn't gain the cover he sought. A bullet ripped through his shoulder, spun him around, and he sprawled in a heap.

"Good shot!" yelled Charley Dade, spurring forward to leap from his saddle upon the fallen man.

"Well, what do yuh think of it now, fellers?" Len asked. "Kinda looks like squawkin' Mr. Clevenger wanted his uncle's scalp, don't it?"

"Yeah," Baldy Jones answered, rubbing his head thoughtfully. "But how the heck— Clevenger didn't shoot Scotty the first time. I *know* that!"

"So do I," put in Dade.

"And so do I—now," Len remarked, his alert eyes scanning the brush-splotched upper end of Soapweed Draw. "Kinda looks like Clevenger might've had a pard, don't it? Well, that pard ought to be around here real close. And it's a cinch he can't ride outta the head of the draw there. There's too much rimrock. S'pose we see."

He grabbed up a handful of dried grass, set fire to it and tossed the flame into a clump of dried mahogany brush. The breeze blowing up the draw fanned the crackling flames. They scattered, spreading rapidly along the bottom and sides of the ravine.

"Get yore guns ready, fellers," Len said to Charley and Baldy. "I've got a hunch we're goin' to fire a coyote out of the brush purty soon. Don't let him get past us."

Len's hunch proved to be right. He was kneeling beside the wounded Scotty, holding the old cattleman's hand and listening to his apologies when Baldy let out a yell.

"There he comes, Len!"

The young puncher leaped to his feet. He pulled his gun as he saw a rider mounted on a roan horse dashing through the burning brush. The fleeing man was shooting as he came, but too much smoke and heat had blurred his vision.

"Deck Gorse!" Baldy whooped. "The crooked gambler from Whirlwind! So he's the skunk that—"

Baldy's gun spat vengefully, and the rider of the roan toppled from

his saddle to land close to where Clevenger lay.

"That's placin' 'em," Charley Dade applauded. "I reckon they belong together. Only, I'm afraid Clevenger's goin' to live."

"So's old Scotty goin' to live!" Len rejoiced.

"Yuh're darn right I am!" the cattleman moaned.

LEN picked up the gun that had belonged to Deck Gorse, the dead gambler. For a moment he examined it.

"So he was packin' a .44, too," he said, then. "Golly! And I blamed yuh for killin' them three cayuses of mine, Scotty. I'm sorry about that."

"But I'm not sorry yuh happened along right when yuh did today," Shaw replied, forcing a grim smile. "In spite of all the smoke raisin' outta Soapweed Draw, I'm seein' some clearer. That lovin' nephew of mine got a little too anxious to inherit the LF spread. That's why he tried to stir up a lot of trouble between yuh and me. To cover his own crooked tracks!"

"And he almost made it stick, Scotty," Baldy Jones put in. "If Len here hadn't tried to bust my neck—and Charley's—yore lovin' nephew would've inherited the LF."

"But I still don't see how that money got in Len's saddle pocket," the quizzical-faced Dade remarked.

"I do," Len replied. "When I come up here a little while ago to investigate that shootin', I didn't come far enough up the draw—and I made the mistake of tyin' my horse to a tree and leavin' him. Deck Gorse must've been watchin' me, and slipped the money in my saddle. He pro'bly knew that, gettin' on from the left side of my horse, I'd never see it stickin' outta that right pocket."

"Doggone!" Baldy whooped. "I wonder if Deck wasn't the feller that robbed old Orin Parshall?"

A slow smile lighted Len's tanned face.

"Clevenger knew when Orin was goin' to town the other mornin'," he recalled. "And Mr. Clevenger headed for town the night I made the deal with Orin. To tip his friend Deck off, I s'pose." He turned to Shaw's injured nephew. "Is that right, Claudie?"

"None of yore business!" came the reply.

"It is right," Len went on. "I happen to know that the money Deck Gorse planted in my saddle pocket wasn't the same money he'd took off Scotty. It was some of what I'd paid old Orin—some that I'd been hoardin' up in my red saddle blanket." He reached out and grabbed the roll protruding from Claude Clevenger's shirt. "See there? It's stained kinda red. Dye sweated outta a Navajo blanket."

"And here's the money Scotty was packin'!" Charley Dade announced, holding aloft a packet of currency he had found in Deck Gorse's clothing.

"Huh!" old Scotty Shaw put in. "I guess that straightens things out. Well, Len, I know yuh're figgerin' on startin' a horse ranch at Cowhide Springs. But we're goin' to slap yore brand on a hundred LF cows whether yuh want 'em or not! And when I get well, don't ever let me ketch yuh ridin' past the LF without comin' in for dinner. If yuh do, I'll rope yuh and drag yuh back. And there won't be no sneakin' nephews hangin' around cuttin' yore short latigo half in two, neither!"

A. Leslie, Tom J. Hopkins, Grant Taylor, Jackson Cole, W. D. Hoffman and Other Popular Writers in Next Month's THRILLING WESTERN

Bad News About His Home Ranch Drifted to Hayman Brandt—that's Why He Came Galloping in!

Flame flashed from his hand

SOLD OUT

By FRANK CARL YOUNG

Author of "Scorpion Brand," "Bullet Business," etc.

THE sun was just setting—disappearing beyond the western ridge when Hayman Brandt loped into the prospering town of Madison. In an hour it would be dark. Without losing a moment elsewhere, he guided his weary cayuse to the worn hitchrack before the unpretentious offices of lawyer Ernie Slane.

"Slane will know," he thought, as he dusted himself and strode across

the planking to the brown, unpainted door. "He allus was Pop's friend. If Renshaw pulled a whizzer, I'll blame soon find out."

His hand stretched out to grab the doorknob. It touched it, slightly. The next moment he was whirling about, crouching.

Two slugs hissed and splintered the framework of the door on either side of him, followed by the flat blat of growling Colts.

"McAleer!" he cursed, and his hands froze at his sides, as he glared at the familiar figure followed by another, their guns still smoking, levelled.

"Jes' hold that 'ere pretty pose till we reach yuh," Sheriff Sark McAleer snorted.

Motioning his deputy, Tip Brass, the sheriff sauntered easily, cautiously to a point three feet from Hay.

"Jes' a reception, or what?" Brandt's voice rustled softly, yet contemptuously.

"Yuh know right well what it is!" McAleer snorted, jerking a club-like thumb toward Hay's thonged gun. "I tol' yuh two years ago, before yuh left fer th' Border, that if yuh wanted tuh come back an' parade around yere in this man's town, yuh come without guns, didn't I? Wa-al, I don't make greaser talk 'r tell fairy tales. I mean what I say! Git his gun an' belt, Brass."

Hay twitched from biting anger. But he mustn't let McAleer know that. While Brass hesitantly disarmed him and cautiously stepped back, he fought to control himself. The deputy, he could see, wasn't taking any chances, for from the stories that must have been circulated, chiefly by McAleer, they must have painted him pretty red.

"I reckon now I c'n visit yore smelly jug, eh?" Hay inquired, his voice tinged with honey-sweet sarcasm. "It would sorta suit yuh an' Renshaw, I figure."

"Keep yore tongue right peaceful, Brandt." McAleer cautioned him, although nothing would have given him more pleasure than a logical opportunity to get Hay out of the way forever. "I ain't juggin' yuh or anything like it. It costs this town money tuh do that."

Brandt chuckled at that.

"I'll keep yore gun, though, an' when yo're ready tuh pull out yuh c'n git it," McAleer went on. "O' course, Brass an' me will sorta escort yuh out tuh th' town limits then. But git this: if I ketch yuh borrowin' or totin' another weapon while you're here, I don't pull my gun sights so far off center again. C'mon, Brass."

"Jes' a minute, McAleer."

BRANDT stuffed his hands into his pockets and studied the planking at his feet. The sheriff, for some reason or another expecting attack, whirled and crouched, his arms tense and eager.

When he saw his own foolishness at such movement, he grew nervous.

"Wa-al, what now?"

Brandt eyed McAleer sharply, thoughtfuly, as though he might be able to read that which would tell him much.

"I was jes' up tuh my ranch a spell," he began.

The sheriff laughed and slapped his thigh.

"Yore ranch?" he jeered. "Ha! Say, that outfit'll never bear the weight of a JB-2 yearlin' again. Renshaw's got it now. Yore pop sold out tuh him."

Brandt's eyes widened and his brows arched high. "Oh, so yuh know, too, eh?"

"Why not? Everybody knows it." McAleer paused, rubbed his chin. "Tough yore ol' man had tuh kill hisself afterward."

Brandt was ice.

"An' why did he do it?" he shot out.

"Too many debts, that's why!" McAleer blared forth equally as quickly. "Even after he sold th' works tuh Renshaw, he didn't have enough cash. An' he kept that sale quiet fer a week, he did."

"How d'yuh know? Was yuh there when he sold it or somethin'?" It was a direct challenge.

At this Sheriff McAleer stirred restlessly.

"Why chew this dry fodder?" Brass insisted. "C'mon, Sark, let's roll on."

McAleer would have, but Hay quickly, but gently, detained him by the mere pressure of his hand on his shoulder.

"Yuh ain't walkin' out on me without tellin', are yuh, Sheriff?"

"Why should I?" came the defiant snarl. "Renshaw told me afterward that Joe Brandt sold him th' ranch a week before he killed hisself. Now if that's all yuh want tuh know, I'll be goin'!"

"Know th' date o' that sale, d' yuh?" It was a long shot in the dark, and Hay flung it out wildly.

"Th' twenty-first o' May, tuh be exact," McAleer said, to Hay's surprise. "Happen tuh know, 'cause it's my birthday."

Hay fumbled in his pocket. A second later a white letter fluttered in his hand.

"Right funny, that is, Sheriff," he said sneeringly. "This is dated th' twenty-fourth, three days later. It's a letter from Pop, tellin' me he figures it's about time I became his legal partner an' should come rollin' home. Very funny, ain't it—that he should want me tuh be his partner when it happens he ain't got any ranch left?"

If McAleer was annoyed over this bit of news, he didn't show it. He just stood there, glaring at Brandt, tense and stiff as a pole. Brass regarded the pair with wonder in his blue eyes.

"That date I gave yuh was th' one tol' tuh me," McAleer finally answered, and his voice came slowly, thoughtfully.

"Yeh, shore thing," Brandt put in tunefully. "An' mebbe yuh'll be tellin' me, too, that perhaps Pop didn't kill hisself after all! Mebbe he was killed by someone else who—"

"What?" Brass yelped.

BUT at this moment another figure appeared on the sidewalk a dozen feet away. It furnished an opportunity for McAleer and Brass to depart.

And without the semblance of grace, they scurried off, mumbling and gesticulating, Brandt's gun and belt swaying from the smaller man's hand as they headed for the jail house.

"You—Brandt."

Ernie Slane was a solicitous sort of man. He was generally wringing his hands and believing he could do most anything for anyone. But now Hay was surprised.

Instead of bowing and smiling in his usual frozen-faced manner, Slane paled and his right hand made a slight movement toward his left armpit.

In that instant Brandt became wary, although he wondered what could cause Slane to wish to pull a gun on him.

It was a move the lawyer hoped his visitor hadn't seen. A moment later he was himself once again. But Hay now knew that his mannerisms were forced.

"This certainly is a surprise for me," the lawyer cackled, ushering Hay toward his office where he offered him a chair that threatened momentarily to fall apart. "But now that you're here, let me say that I am mighty glad to see you again. You know, your father and me were the best of friends. And of course,

what was good for him is good for his son."

"I have little time tuh waste, Slane," Brandt told him quickly, and he noticed the other become uneasy again. "As I get it, Pop sold th' ranch tuh Renshaw. Yuh know how we stood with that outfit. There was little of anythin' except lead wasted between us, an' I can't savvy this deal nohow, knowing Pop like I did, and how he hated Hoyt an' his lazy kid, Thiel."

The lawyer was nibbling at his thin, purplish lips, and his slender, woman-like fingers drummed nervously on the edge of his battered desk.

"Yes—yes, go on, Hay," he said in a strained, worried voice. "What's on your mind?"

"Did Pop sell th' JB-2 tuh Hoyt Renshaw?"

The lawyer lowered his gaze and fumbled with his watch chain. When he finally answered, he didn't look up, but concentrated on the tip of his finger.

"Yes, Hay, your father did sell out to Renshaw. I'll admit it seems funny, but he did, just the same. I spoke harshly to him about it, protested to a great extent, but he would have his way. You see, his debts were worrying him considerably."

"He never had that many debts, Slane!" Hay blurted hotly, wishing the next moment he had controlled himself better. "I'm a little het up about this, Ernie," he apologized, "Don't mind me. Go on."

Slane took firmer heart. Stiffening, he once again became the benevolent, well-poised lawyer Brandt remembered best.

"Hay, yuh know I've handled everything for the best interests of your family. As I said, I protested vigorously, but your father insisted, and so I had the deed drawn up. He signed, and I had his signature witnessed. Then—"

"Who were the witnesses?" Hay wanted to know before he could go on.

"Why, I figured a couple of men in town would be the best, so I called in Pike Clayton, who runs the general store, and Buck Nace, the blacksmith. Both good men and willing to do me a favor most any time."

Brandt knew both men. As Slane claimed, they were dependable. At least they had been.

HE picked up his hat and moved toward the door. There he turned and faced the lawyer in a grim-lipped manner.

"Thanks, Slane," he said coldly. "What you've jes' tol' me hasn't helped any, an' it shore looks like Pop did sell the ranch. But blamed," he spoke hotly, passionately, "if I c'n believe it! An' I won't till I c'n see his name in black an' white with my own eyes!"

"Where yuh goin'?" Slane asked anxiously, squeakily, as though chilled with alarm.

"Tuh git that deed!"

Then Brandt was gone, his high heels clicking hurriedly down the worn steps, spurs jangling.

Brandt strode directly to the home of Wiggy Wiginis, the old prospector and best friend of his father. He had struck it rich and promptly set himself up as the only banker in town.

Had Hay turned and glanced back, he might have seen the sheriff and the deputy watching his every move and following him. Also he might have seen Buck Nace, the blacksmith, close his shop and cross the street to enter Slane's office.

Wiggy opened the door himself.

"Wa-al, if it ain't Hayman Brandt!" he greeted with warm cordiality.

Brandt stared at the little man whose round, rosy-cheeked features he would never forget. Many were

the times that the old man had come to the ranch to tell of his exploits and "near ums" in the ancient quest for gold.

Clasping hands, they silently stared at each other with such deep meaning that mere words would have sounded dull, unworthy, and incomplete.

"Cripes, son," the old prospector finally said, "yo're shore a fine sight fer any kind o' eyes, but particularly mine. Still as hell-bent and fiery as yuh uster be? Say, I can remember when—"

Hay smiled with amusement. He knew that Wiggy could remember most anything, and there had been the time when he claimed to have remembered dusting off the rock for the Pilgrims to land on. But other matters pressed now and needed attention.

Swiftly he told his story and suspicions, and voiced disbelief that his father ever sold out to Renshaw, or that he killed himself.

"Wa-al, it shore looks like they got yuh up a dang bare tree, Hay," Wiggy soliloquized, glancing over his cigar and wishing that he might once again buckle on his guns and go to war with this youthful replica of the man he once knew and respected.

"They have if I fail in jes' one thing, Wiggy," Brandt decided, rising and standing above the other. "An' it depends on you."

WIGGY was on his feet remarkably fast, considering his age. He seemed eager, but confused.

"Me?" he asked. "How can it depend on me?"

"Can yuh git into that bank o' yores after closin' hours?" Brandt asked.

Wiggy frowned.

"Wa-al, I can," he admitted reluctantly. "But it jes' ain't what could be called th' best policy fer me t' follow. After all, the sheriff might make a mistake an' take a lick at me with his gun. Why ask that?"

"Because Renshaw's got some valuable papers if Pop really sold him th' ranch. An' there's only one place fer important papers—in a bank safe. Ten t' one Renshaw's got his papers in your safe. That means, if he has the deed it will be found there."

"I guess it would be at that," Wiggy replied, flicking the ashes from his cigar carelessly and staring hard into Brandt's frosty eyes. "Yuh mean tuh—"

His brows lifted questioningly.

"Yes, jes' that! I want tuh git a hold on that deed. I want tuh see Pop's signature. Then I'll be satisfied."

"But—"

"Shucks, Wiggy, no one will have tuh know. Are yuh fer it?"

The old prospector was silent for a moment. Then he raised his clear blue eyes to those of the younger man.

"Hay, yore Pop once took a slug in the shoulder fer me," he said "I ain't fergot. Fer his sake, an' yore's too, I'll do it. But we gotta be dang careful. There's the sheriff t' watch out fer—"

Just at this moment someone pounded heavily on the door. Both men quickly looked at each other; then glared at the door. For a second there was a hushed mumble of voices outside.

"C'mon, Wiginis! Why so slow?" came a voice Brandt had learned early in life to hate.

"Renshaw!" gulped Wiggy nervously, and he flushed red, then white. "Listen, Hay, yuh better duck out into th' next room fer a spell till I see what he wants. If he saw yuh here he might git suspicious an' put McAleer on yore tracks."

"I guess he ain't very far off 'em as it is," Brandt grumbled. He tip-toed from the room and disappeared into

the kitchen, where, if necessary, he could slip out the rear door unnoticed.

"Comin' right away," Wiggy called, as soon as Hay was gone.

He hurried to the door. Hoyt and Thiel Renshaw stood impatiently on the porch, an inscrutable gleam in their eyes.

"Come in," welcomed Wiggy, motioning inside with his hand.

MEEKLY and with lowered eyes, the two Renshaws stepped in, but they would not be seated. Something of a serious nature seemed to press on their minds, for they were agitated and eager.

"Wiginis," said Hoyt gently in his purring voice, "we came here tuh see yuh because what we wish done we figure tuh be tuh th' best interests of everybody."

Wiggy suppressed the grin that ached to caress his lips.

"An' what do yuh want me tuh do?" he asked.

Thiel leaned against the mantel in his slouchy manner, his dark, languid eyes squinting above a sagging cigarette caught between his pendulous lips.

He managed to rouse himself sufficiently to speak.

"Not much, Wiginis," he said sleepily. "Jes' open that bank o' yores fer a minute 'r two so's Dad an' me c'n git some o' our papers from th' safe. Y' understand, 'tain't much we ask, considerin' as tuh how we got everything we own banked with you."

"But, gentlemen!" And Wiggy's brows jerked mightily.

Hay, listening anxiously in the other room, lowered his, and his eyes became slits of shimmering ice.

"Of course it's a little unusual," suggested Hoyt, endeavoring to temporize Wiggy. "But the situation confronting us is th' same. As yuh may know, young Brandt is in town. We feel that considerin' th' circumstances of our past relationship, an' th' fact that we now own th' JB-2, he might do something pretty underhanded. Yuh know, judgin' from his former antics, it wouldn't be surprisin' tuh learn that he broke into a bank."

Had Renshaw chosen to become more explicit he might have added aloud, "to rob me of a certain deed I don't want tuh lose."

And at that moment, had Brandt had a gun, he would have killed Hoyt Renshaw.

Instead, he clamped his teeth and wondered what course, other than agreeing, Wiggy could possibly follow. By virtue of his position, he was supposed to show preference to depositors—and Renshaw was his greatest. If he refused the Renshaws, they would instantly become suspicious.

"But t'morrow—why not wait until then?" pleaded Wiggy, hoping to stall in order to give Brandt a chance.

A glassy look of suspicion crept into Hoyt's eyes. But Thiel stirred.

"T'night, Wiginis!" he insisted. "Yuh see, I happen tuh recall that you an' th' Brandts were pretty—"

"Shut up, son!" his father snapped, for he didn't wish to antagonize the one man his hopes depended on.

Wiggy sighed wearily and reached for his hat, but he cast a quick glance toward the room in which he knew Hay listened and waited.

"I can't refuse," he said bluntly, moving toward the door.

Brandt saw through the keyhole a certain movement that gave him a thin shred of hope—Wiggy was making sure he had his gun.

Brandt knew he couldn't afford to depend on any other than himself. He knew that he must see that deed. On that rested his only chance of ever proving conclusively one way

or another whether his father had sold out to Renshaw or not. And the only way now left open for him was forcibly to stop the ranchers and take it from them.

All he needed was a gun.

"Those two throw a .45 mighty fast," he muttered bitterly, as he vainly cast about in search of a weapon. "Guess th' only gun Wiggy's got is th' one he totes on his hip," he concluded, after a quarter of an hour.

He lost no further time getting outside. It was dark, and he had little trouble in passing unobserved down the street to the general store. To his surprise and disappointment it was now closed. Here he had intended procuring a gun and shells.

But Brandt hadn't spent his early youth in Madison without learning something of the faults of its inhabitants. Gliding like a black wraith around the building, he paused at a side window and gently opened it.

It came to him just as he was throwing his leg over the sill—he was entering the abode of Pike Clayton, one of the men who witnessed his father's signature.

With the stealth of a preying cat, he slipped into the storeroom. At the gun case he withdrew a weapon. Dropping his hand, he procured a shell box and lessened its contents.

Stuffing shells into the empty chambers, he shoved the gun in his belt and turned toward the window again. But just as he was about to slide out he heard muffled voices in the back room. Beneath the door was a line of light, which he hadn't noticed up till now.

Back across the room he crept. Kneeling, he cocked his eye to the keyhole.

There, in the other room, were Pike Clayton and Buck Nace.

"Pike, we've walked into a jam," Nace, the blacksmith, was saying. "Remember, we witnessed ol' Joc Brandt's signature on that sale, even though he wasn't there at th' time? Yuh remember, don't you, that Ernie Slane said it was all right, legal an' everything?

"Wa-al, I jes' found out that Brandt never made that signature. Slane forged it an' was paid plenty fer doin' it by Hoyt Renshaw!"

CLAYTON looked as though he was going to faint.

"How in blazes d'yuh know all this, man?" he gulped, pop-eyed and pale as death, for the man had never intentionally done anything off color in his life.

"I jes' found Slane dead," whispered the blacksmith fearfully. "Went over there a little spell back tuh ask him about that carriage bill he owes me, an' there he was—slumped over his desk, dead. I found a confession beside him.

"He said in it that, if Hay Brandt once saw th' signature we witnessed, he would know at once it was false. I reckon that's why he killed himself."

"By cripes, Buck," exploded the storekeeper, wiping his pasty white brow and sitting down weakly, "we're shore in a pretty mess!"

"Shore thing. But here's th' worst of it. Ol' Joc Brandt didn't commit suicide. He was killed!"

"Phew!" The storekeeper shriveled in his chair.

"That was all part of it—an' we didn't know anything about it. Yep, Pike, yo're right when yuh figure we're in a bad tangle."

"Ol' Joc Brandt killed!" breathed Clayton, just about all in. "Who—who killed him?"

"That's jes' what I want tuh know, too," came another voice, and into the room stepped Brandt, his face set and rigid. "Speak out—quick!"

But before either man could utter a syllable, the side door flew open, and two other figures leaped in.

"Brandt!" yelped Sark McAleer, his deputy at his shoulder. "I tol' yuh tuh keep yore dirty paws off guns. An' don't say yuh ain't got any, 'cause I've been watchin' yuh fer th' last ten minutes from across the street. Saw yuh slip in that window an' all, an' there's only one reason fer doin' that. This time it's gonna be tough fer yuh, wild 'un!"

"Jes' a minute," Hay said quickly, before they set out to disarm him. "Before I get out o' here I want a question answered."

He turned to the two local business men. Nace's face was filled with terror.

"Git it over with quick, then," growled McAleer.

"Shore." Hay glanced at Nace once again. "Yuh heard my question, Buck. What's th' answer tuh it?"

For a moment it seemed the burly blacksmith would never be able to speak again, he was so stiff, seeming to have become petrified with fear. His eyes were as still as a picture and rooted on the towering figures in the doorway.

It seemed that he wanted to speak, but found it impossible, as though in a gripping trance.

Then Pike stirred in back of him. He roused himself from the spell that had doomed him in silence.

"That man—" He pointed. "Th' one that killed ol' Joc Brandt—is th' man that's a-standin'—" He gulped, struggled to continue, then suddenly blurted: "McAleer—that's him!"

"That's a lie!" came creaming from McAleer, but he was pulling his gun as he howled it.

Brass puzzled and completely surprised at the revelation, leaped aside.

Brandt twisted fiercely, teeth bared. McAleer's gun scraped leather. In one swift motion, imperceptible to the eye, Brandt's hand dived to his waist. Like a plummet, he dropped to the floor, flame splashing from his hand.

McAleer stopped, stark. The Colt twirled in his hand, then dropped to the floor. His knees bent forward, shaking. With a curse on his lips, he collapsed and sank lifeless beside his gun.

THE sound of Brandt's shot had hardly died when in through the doorway pounced Wiggy, gun out, his face alive with excitement and eagerness.

"Shucks, jes' as I figured—too late!" he bellowed, snapping his fingers in disgust. "What happened?"

Brandt swiftly told him, filling in where he thought necessary to make it clear.

"It was Renshaw's money behind the whole thing. McAleer was paid plenty for killing Pop. He went up there that day, caught Pop unawares inside and shot him at close range. At least, that's th' way I figure it.

"It was a small matter tuh substitute the exploded shell for one in Pop's gun to make it look like suicide; an' since he was always firing at rabbits an' th' like, his gun naturally was dirty."

Brass stood petrified, staring down at the distorted features of McAleer.

"Hay, believe me, I didn't know a single thing about this," he said earnestly. "Tuh prove it, I'll round up them Renshaw swine an' give 'em everything they got comin'!"

"Needn't bother to, son," piped Wiggy. "She's already been did, an' did right."

"What d'yuh mean?" Brandt asked.

"Wa-al, any time yuh want 'em, jes' drop in at th' bank. I got 'em both nicely tucked inside. Yuh don't think an' ol'-timer like me would let yuh down, do yuh, Hay? Why, I can remember when you was a little tike—"

Brandt grinned contentedly and took the deed from Wiggy's outstretched hand.

Trigger Trapped

Ren's gun whipped up, spat twice

Ren Taylor Comes to Twinrock in Quest of Vengeance —and Faces Jackpot Coyle, Crooked Gambler, in a Battle of Guns and Wits!

By JACKSON COLE

Author of "Gun Justice," "Fightin' Ranny," etc.

LEAN jaw thrust at a belligerent angle, grey eyes agleam with lights that betokened controlled wrath, young Ren Taylor loped his mouse-colored horse into the little foothill town of Twinrock —and headed straight for the Black Eagle Saloon.

Even if the old stocking-footed sorrel drooping at the hitch rack hadn't been there, Ren would still have known that the man he sought was in the saloon.

Unhurriedly the tall, broad-shouldered puncher swung from his saddle, dropped the bridle reins and

strode into the log-walled oasis where the loafers of Twinrock congregated both day and night.

The tinkling of his spur rowels attracted immediate attention. The bartender nodded.

The group around the poker table, players and spectators, stared curiously at the bronzed, lithe-moving newcomer.

Only one man, the old cowman who owned the drooping sorrel, failed to look around. He, Perry Hamilton, was too drunk to be alert. His bleary eyes had all they could do to discern what cards had just been dealt him by "Jackpot" Coyle, deft-fingered gambler.

Ren came to a stop near the table, looked down at the half-drowsing Perry and said:

"I thought I'd find yuh here—again."

"Yeah?" The elderly Hamilton blinked heavy-lidded eyes. "Well, don't let it worry yuh none, kid. I'm used tuh comin' to town whenever I want tuh."

"WHICH is all right, ain't it?" put in the suave voice of gambler Jackpot Coyle.

"I was talkin' to Perry here," Ren reminded, with the faintest trace of hostility. "It's all right to come t' town, Perry—yes. But it ain't all right tuh set there tryin' to play poker in such fast company when yuh can't even tell a deuce from an ace. Better come on back t' the ranch with me."

"Go ahead. I'll be along later," the older man mumbled.

"Better come now," Ren insisted. "How much money have yuh lost today?"

"Four hundred dollars—if it's any of yore business!" Jackpot Coyle snapped. "But it ain't. Jest because yuh fell into yore old man's share of the K-Bar outfit ain't no sign that Perry still don't own his half of it. He's free tuh do what he wants tuh with his own interest."

Ren's grey eyes turned colder as he met the gambler's gaze.

"So the hawk-nosed buzzard's squawkin', is he? Afraid that somebody's goin' to take his nice juicy carcass away before he kin pick it clean to the bone?"

Coyle's face turned a shade paler. He half rose from his chair, took another long look into those steady eyes confronting him, challenging him, and slipped back into his chair again.

"I WOULDN'T be quite so bossy if I were yuh," he said. "Yuh've only been back in this country for three days. I'd stay a week, anyhow, before I appointed myself boss of the K-Bar outfit, and boss of the other pardner. Besides, Mr. Taylor, it's been hinted by certain folks that mebbe yuh kinda hurried up yore inheritance!"

"Meanin' what?" Ren clicked.

"Meanin' that yuh knowed you was goin' to grab off yore old man's share of the K-Bar some day and—well—kinda hurried things up. Nobody knows jest how-come he disappeared so sudden."

"I think mebbe somebody does." The puncher's eyes were drilling Jackpot Coyle. "I understand Dad had a little poker game with you the day he disappeared. I hear he beat yuh at yore own game, you sleeve-dealin' tinhorn! Took yore money away from yuh. My hunch is that yuh followed him out on the range with the hope of gettin' yore money back—no matter how!"

Silence, like that between the lightning's flash and the thunder's roar, reigned over the Black Eagle for a moment.

Ren Taylor had hurled a serious charge; had been subjected to one himself.

Eyes clashed with eyes. At

Coyle's left elbow sat his henchman, glittering-orbed "Frenchy" LaVoe. Ever so slightly the gambler nodded. That was Frenchy's signal to come to his master's aid. Slowly, craftily the latter's hand moved. Then it whisked downward, caught the butt of a gun.

Ren caught the movement from the corner of his eye. His own .45 leaped from leather, roared a split second before the other man's. There was the sound of a snarl turning to a groan. Frenchy LaVoe pitched forward, but Ren wasn't watching him. Again the young man's gaze, alert, challenging, was on the tense Coyle.

"Well, what are yuh waitin' fer?" he demanded. "Yuh sicced your crony into the battle. Grab yore gun and wade in yoreself!"

Still the gambler hesitated, as if frozen to his chair.

"And while we're settlin' things," Ren went on, still in that glacial tone, "s'pose yuh fork over that money Dad was packin' the day yuh plugged him!"

"I NEVER took a cent off'n yore dad," Coyle gulped. "He won my money. Nearly a thousand dollars of it!"

This swiftly-enacted tragedy had sobered the drunken Perry Hamilton to some extent. He rose from the table, backed away toward the spectators who had risen.

"Jest a minute, Perry," Ren said. "Yuh're in on this, too."

"Yuh're damn right he is," exclaimed the cowed Coyle. "Mebbe he figgered to glom on to all the K-Bar by gettin' rid of his pardner."

"That's a lie," the old man declared hotly. "I've drunk, and played cards, and made a fool of myself, but I ain't the kind that stoops tuh murder. We don't know if Ren's father *was* murdered, far as that part's concerned. But if he was, I didn't do it. It lays between you two." And, with a gnarled, trembling finger, he pointed accusingly to Ren and Coyle.

Again silence reigned. Old Perry turned and staggered toward the front door; but Jackpot Coyle yelled:

"Hold on, yuh old welsher! Fork over that money yuh owe me before yuh leave. Either that or some more I. O. U.'s."

"Yuh're a fool if yuh do, Perry," Ren stated. "Yuh're just lettin' that card-shark steal yuh blind."

"I don't welsh!" the old man said, signing the slip of paper Coyle had thrust across the table. "If I let somebody trim me, that's my fault. I'll square things when the K-Bar steers are shipped this fall. They're half mine, and so's the ranch."

"Yeah," Ren drawled. "The way yuh're rarin' up at me, mebbe you'd rather I hadn't showed up at all, Perry? Maybe you're wishin' the whole outfit was yours?"

"I sure don't like the way the Taylor half of it's changin' hands, if that's what you mean," the old cowman retorted. "It shore looks fishy to me. And I happen to know that you and yore dad wasn't on very good terms that time you run off from home about six years ago!"

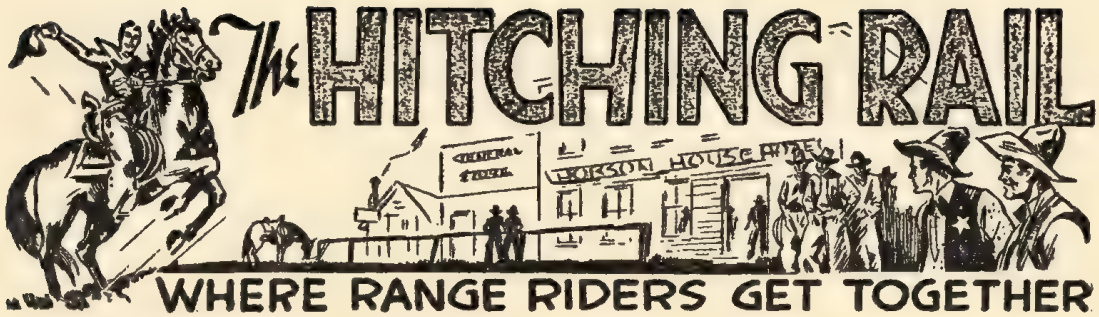
Sheriff Dave Ostrand, who had entered the saloon, now stepped forward to confront Ren.

"I've been listenin'," he said, "to the talk goin' on here. Mebbe yuh'd better come along with me, Ren Taylor."

"Fer killin' that tricky skunk?" the young puncher inquired, pointing to the slain LaVoe.

"Nope." Sheriff Ostrand shook his iron grey head. "I'm not holdin' that against yuh; not when it was a case of kill or get killed. But I would like to talk to you about the sudden disappearance of yore dad, Lon Taylor. Come on."

(Continued on page 122)



HOLA, FOLKS! Howdy ag'in. Don't th' months go rompin' by like all gitout? Last month I was a-tellin' yuh 'bout snow storms in midsummer time, out in our cow country, an' now I shore got a wild yarn tuh spin yuh, 'cept I gotta cut it fer lack o' space.

Boss says I'm allers a durned hawg fer wantin' tuh crowd ev'rybody else outa these yere pages. But, this time, it's all his fault an' he ain't got no comeback. He poked his good-lookin' head right intuh th' loop an' all I hadda do was tuh lug on it an' sit tight.

An' yere's what he done, folks, shore's I'm swivelin' in this yere chair an' chawin' th' west end o' my moustache what Miss Blondie says war meant fer a goat's chin. That gal jest don't know nuthin'.

We War He-Men Then

Ef Buffalo Bill, my ol' pal onct upon a time, wore a big moustache, reckon I kin, too. We war he-men in them days, without none o' these eye-brow hairs fellas wears nowadays over their upper lips. Well, know what th' boss went an' did? He told me that this yere weather bein' so durned hot now, an' his orders fer us all tuh wear bathin' suits while workin' in th' office havin' gone off fine, he wanted I should send down uh invite tuh th' boys tuh come rompin' back yere as his guests fer a week!

Six uv 'em, he said, an' all must be real *hombres* an' swell lookers. So I pulls out my last list o' ol' range pals an' pounds out a right han'some invite tuh each. They was Jess Taylor, Dude Chaney, Shorty Hall, all o' th' Arizony Diamond A. Then I picks out Johnny Moore, most better knowed as "Th' Gol'-durned Wheel," who plays a harmonica like he was borned with one between his buck teeth. That made four from th' Southwest, so, tuh be fair an' square, I invites Baldy Wiggins from th' Square-Bar spread up in Montany, an' along with him a fella called "Squint" Lacey, a pal o' Baldy's. Th' boss had me mail 'em all tickets, too, with all th' Pullman trimmin's an' dough enough tuh stand them dinin' cyar expenses.

An' Did They Come?

An' did they arrive? Say, th' Pennsylvania depot couldn't hold 'em an' their durned yells when they clawed outa th' crowds an' grabbed th' boss, Blondie an' me, what'd gone tuh welcome 'em tuh this yere noble city. High-heeled boots clattered 'crost them white tiles in that depot like ev'rybody war wearin' iron shoes fit only fer broncs. Rowels jingled like Lady Astor's jewelry. Big hats an' flappin' chaps brung up a windstorm what sent people starin' like th' depot war bein' held up by th' old Dalton gang. Old fella standin' nearby yipped like he'd been bit in th' seat o' his trousers by uh locoed timber wolf an' butted intuh some ol' lady's middle, sendin' 'em both sprawlin' till some o' them red-capped fellas comes flyin' up an' tellin' everybody tuh stand quiet, that we was jest a new parade from a circus an' meanin' no harm.

Th' boss, he war alaughin' like he'd never fingered that ol' six-gun he keeps in his desk whenever I gits squirmin' round in this yere chair an' eyein' him mean-like, thinkin' how he's keepin' me penned up back yere when I oughta be straddlin' a bronc an' hearin' th' white-faces bawlin' all round me ag'in, like I usta.

A Right Interestin' Week

Well, folks, it's shore been a right interestin' week, entertainin' all them flea-beaten cowpokes from th' chaparral an' sage country. I cain't go intuh details, 'cause o' lack o' space, but some things may int'rest yuh. Jess Taylor, fer instance, tryin' tuh save Miss Blondie's life when we all swum at Coney Island—an' her a medal winner fer th' Australian Crawl.

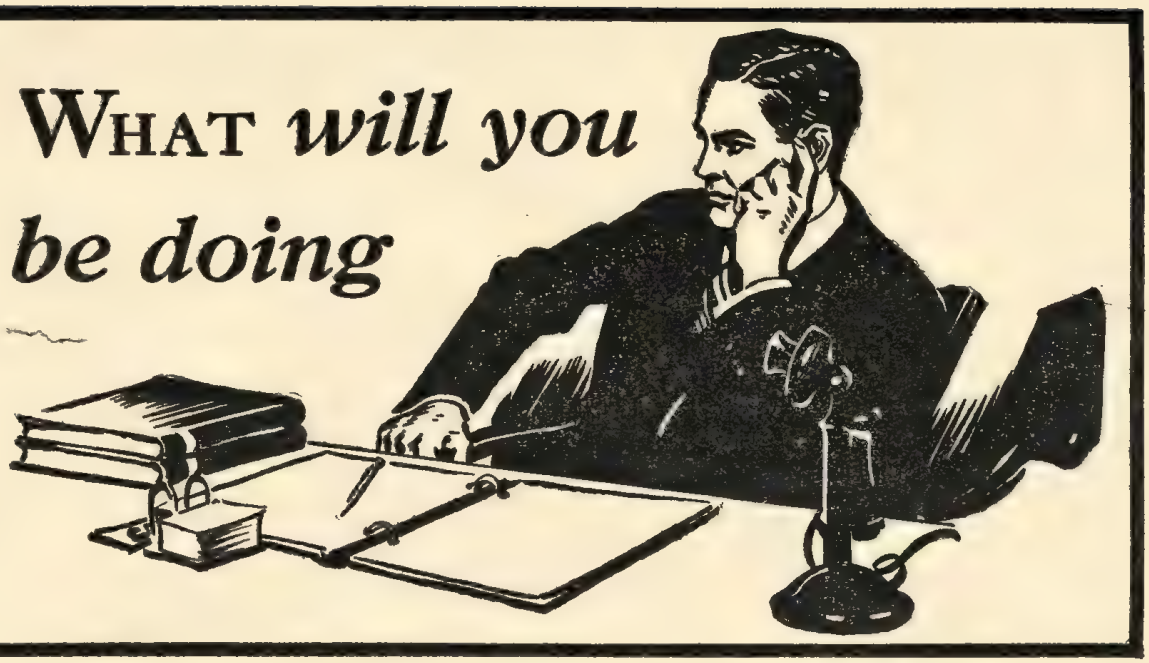
But she took her rescue brave an' let Jess drag 'er tuh th' pier, where he shipped a gallon o' sea water intuh his lungs an' she hadda tow 'im th' rest o' th' way. Told 'im he war a real "Johnny Weismuller th' second!" An' Jess glowed like he'd been stung by a nest o' desert scorpions, grinnin' with pride.

Then Baldy Wiggins an' that Squint Lacey *hombre* found th' boss' six-gun in that desk an' wantin' tuh see how it'd shoot, plugged six holes in th' ceilin'. Comes down a wild bellowin' o' screeches from upstairs what'd most bust yore eardrums, then flyin' feet scramblin' down th' fire-escape. Th' boss, he drug out bunch o' bottles o' what he called "Exhilerator," while we was on top o' one o' them Fifth Avenue busses.

That trip down Broadway became an eyeful fer th' downtrodden masses. We

(Continued on page 120)

WHAT *will you be doing*



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(Continued from page 118)

'most run outa songs afore we reached th' Battery an' went in tuh see them fishes. Dude Chaney felt sorry fer 'em an' started crawlin' inside one o' them fish tanks, sayin' they'd oughta have more fresh air an' that he liked th' gold ones. I hadda bust Dude over th' haid tuh drag 'im back afore them cops got too clost. Th' Gol'-durned Wheel said "Music soothes th' savage breast" and started whangin' his danged little mouth organ like all hell-an'-gone. Folks crowded round like we was a bunch o' old fashioned street singers, cheerin' ev'ry durned tune th' Gol-durned-Wheel peeled off. Baldy an' Shorty Hall figgered it war a fine idee tuh pass their big Stetsons fer a collection an', believe it or not, fellas an' gals, we took in fourteen dollars an' nine cents, which we split among us when we got back tuh th' boss' office; only that started a poker game an' Miss Blondie won th' hull works.

Jess Taylor's Idee

Jess Taylor whispered tuh me ef it war time enough he'd knowed her tuh propose, but one look intuh his solemn face what's color o' old leather an' shore seamed by sandstorms an' I advized ag'in it. Then that swell dinner th' boss give us in th' Plaza Hotel. Baldy, he thinks th' celery's meant fer button holes an' tries pinnin' some on Miss Blondie's dress, but all she done was tuh bite it. Ain't th' hull story, folks, but cain't give no more time tuh it. Th' bunch left las' night, all asmilin' an' promisin' th' boss all th' broncs on their ranches ef he'd go out there.

Some day, him an' me will; an' mebbe Miss Blondie'll come, too. She makes ev'ry day worth while, with her bright smile fer all. All I kin say about our week's party, friends, is that our boss shore knows his onions—an' his cowboys. They're for 'im, strong!

Sorta Tall, Ain't Yuh?

An' now, tuh work ag'in. Letter from Buck Hallister, up Seattle way. Sorta tall, ain't yuh, Buck—six foot four an' still growin'? But yuh shore sits well on that pinto o' your'n, an' got yore riggin' on right, too. Reckon yuh've rode range, though yuh don't say so. Buck wants tuh know 'bout mountain lions an' where's th' best place tuh hunt 'em, an' what's th' biggest ever shot.

Buck, them varmints is all over our West, but fine place tuh hunt 'em's down in southern New Mexico, in th' old Hatchet Mountains. However, southern Texas kin show yuh a heap o' them kitties. Bruce Duncan, foreman o' th' Rancho Valle de la Cienega, near Alpine, Texas, in th' Big Bend country, has prob'ly killed more'n any other one man. Ask fer him ef yuh goes thataway, an' yuh'll find an upstandin' *hombre* what yuh'll shore like a heap. He

holds th' record fer killin' th' biggest cat ever seen in that part o' th' West.

The giant lion weighed 203 pounds and measured eight feet nine inches from tail tip tuh tip o' nose. He shot it outa a tree on Mount Ord, 20 miles south o' Alpine, after a three hour chase. Bruce says that that lion jumped off'n a hundred foot cliff when his dogs got too clost, an' one dog, old "Red," follered right behind, takin' th' same jump. Neither was hurted, an', down at th' bottom, they fought tuh th' death, with Bruce landin' a lucky shot what killed Mister Mountain Lion. 'Cept fer a long drought, ranchers hates them lions as one o' their worst cattle killers. Reports says that from last September tuh end o' December, mountain lions killed more'n 700 sheep in th' Big Bend, an' a heap o' calves an' some cows. But huntin' 'em is shore great, Buck.

Amongst the "Elite"

Next letter's from Charlie Dwight, who bunks down in Miami, Floridy. Must be sorta swell guy, Charlie, livin' down there amongst what th' papers calls th' "Elite." Wisht yuh'd sent along your picture. Makes folks closer, thataway. But yuh scrawls a fine hand, barrin' th' writin'. Some words hard tuh read.

Yuh asks about John H. (Doc) Holliday, western bad man. Doc was SOME *HOMBRE*, Charlie. He was a graduate dentist with T. B., went West fer his health, stopped pullin' teeth an' took tuh pullin' six-guns from his holsters an' aces from bottom o' th' deck. He soon become knowed as one o' th' coldest killers in th' West, with grit what was made o' steel. He finally died, after a heap o' killin's, without his boots on, uh T. B., in a regular bed. He was a good-looker, long, wavy blond hair an' flowin' moustache, blue eyes like a gal's, clean-cut features.

Records says he never weighed over round hundred an' forty pounds an' warn't a very tall fella, but quick as a cat an' without nerves. He throwed in with th' wild Earps, down Tombstone way, fer a long while. He was said tuh be a heavy absorber o' red-eye. Killed his first man in Dallas, over a card game. Skipped tuh ol' Fort Richardson an' run a gamblin' game in Mike McDonald's gamblin' hall. There he shot an' killed five gun-fighters an' made a lotta *dinero* from his games. Then he killed two cavalrymen an' skinned out tuh Colorady, where he notched fer three more men an' won a pot 'bout thirty thousand simoleons. Doc drifted all over th' old West, killin' pretty frequent—a grim, silent, hard-drinkin' *hombre* whose guns never grew cold.

Most Drank Hisself To Death

Lotsa folks believe he was th' one what killed th' famous gunman, Curly Bill, down near Tucson. He slipped away from Arizona law an' went back tuh Colorady, where th' Gov'nor wouldn't allow 'im tuh

(Concluded on page 128)

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TRIGGER TRAPPED

(Continued from page 117)

Jackpot Coyle laughed raucously as the officer led Ren away. Old Perry Hamilton, the Taylors' partner, frowned at the sheriff's prisoner and tugged thoughtfully at the end of his drooping moustache.

Spectators gaped unabashed and mumbled that one question to each other: Who had killed Ren Taylor's father, provided the latter had been murdered?

All of them thought it strange that Ren, who had been away for six years, had returned to the North Basin country the very day his father had vanished.

FOR a long time Ren Taylor and Sheriff Dave Ostrand talked together. Toward dusk that evening, and seen by those curious spectators who still loafed around the Black Eagle Saloon, the young puncher was led by the officer over to the little log jail. Enroute across the street, Ren could overhear Jackpot Coyle's voice gloating:

"Gents, it kinda looks like young Mr. Taylor stuck his foot in a trap by ridin' into town this afternoon and raisin' a ruckus. Huh! Appointin' hisself old Perry Hamilton's guardeen!"

Ren didn't look at the group clustered about the front door of the saloon. Silently, stoically—and handcuffed—he marched through the heavy door which the officer had unlocked for him. Ren had been alone only a short time when Jackpot Coyle, poking his gaunt face against the barred window from the outside, peered within at the lonely prisoner.

"Well, what do yuh think about it now?" he taunted. "Mebbe the next time yuh want to fall into some property, yuh'll wait till the feller

(Continued on page 124)

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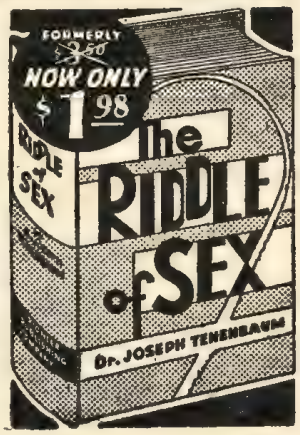

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(Continued from page 122)

ownin' it dies—instead of murderin' him."

"Yeah?" the young man drawled, enigmatically.

"Yeah! And don't go crawfishin' out of it. If your old man's been killed, either you or Perry Hamilton turned the trick!"

"Funny, ain't it?" Ren went on. "If Dad's layin' out there in them hills somewhere, I figger you or Perry done the dirty work. Yuh figger him or me done it. And he figgers it's you or me."

"I wouldn't have no object in doin' it," Coyle retorted. "That thousand dollars he was packin' wasn't won from me, like yuh claimed. He owed me a bunch of money. I give him another thousand — and he handed a bill of sale for his half of the K-Bar over to me. Right here it is!"

REN pressed his face close to the bars while he squinted at the document being exhibited by the leering gambler.

"Huh!" he grunted at last. "Well, that kinda makes things look like I ain't got no business campin' up at the old ranch, don't it? Mebbe I'd better pull my freight, if I ever get out of this place."

"But yuh won't be gettin' out!" Coyle snarled, turning away and walking toward the Black Eagle Saloon again.

When the first faint stars of night began to pierce the dusk, a rider thundered out of Twinrock. Ren saw him leave; thought he recognized him.

It was then the young puncher walked to the heavy door—supposed to have been locked—opened it and stole quietly along the buildings leading to the livery barn where his mouse-colored horse had been left.

"All set!" he hissed to the man hiding in the saddle room. "Juniper

(Continued on page 126)

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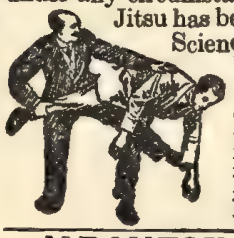

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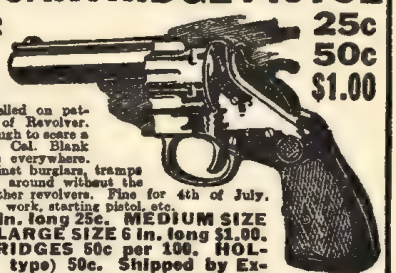

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(Continued from page 124)

Gulch!" And Ren was gone, streaking it out of town.

AN hour later Ren Taylor, crouched in a thick clump of cedars on the west rim of Juniper Gulch, was watching the opposite side. A new moon filtered its light on rock and tree, turning them into grotesque silhouettes. The crouching puncher suddenly tensed.

Off to the south a rider was approaching, a dim moving shape drawing nearer to the mouth of the deep, narrow gulch. The latter hesitated, looked around for a moment, then swung off his horse and began to ascent afoot the steep bank leading from the shadowed bottom of the gulch.

Eyes narrowed, hand close to his gun, Ren Taylor watched the other's every move. Higher and higher the newcomer climbed, stopping at last beside a dense patch of junipers just under the east rim of the narrow defile.

Ren stood up, hitched his gun around to its most convenient position and began moving down the west side of the draw.

He had crossed the bottom and was starting up the east side when one of his boots loosened a small rock which clattered down the steep embankment. Almost simultaneously with that noise, a gun roared. And a whining bullet whistled so close to the young puncher's face that he staggered as he fell away from it.

The newcomer had seen him, was raining a staccato of hot lead in his direction. A yell went up from the bottom of the deep draw. But Ren didn't turn to look.

He was watching for the man who had climbed to that rocky pocket close to the east rim. At last he saw a hat moving just behind the surface of a jutting boulder. Then, for the fraction of a second, a gaunt face

and neck appeared beneath the hat.

Ren's gun whipped up, spat twice. A leaden slug seared his left arm close to the shoulder as the other man, fighting with the desperation of a cornered wolf, answered the firing. Yet, though he was less protected than was his opponent, Ren sought no covered retreat.

Exploding gunpowder licked the night like serpentine tongues of flame. Shots roared and echoed along the narrow gulch, and still the puncher stood his ground.

At last his enemy, probably too anxious to cut down the man who had him trapped, exposed too much head and shoulders. The puncher's gun roared fast, twice, three times. The ensuing yell told him that he had found his target, that and the dull thud of a body sprawling to the earth.

"Well, Mr. Coyle?"

Still holding his smoking gun in readiness, Ren moved cautiously toward his fallen enemy. But Coyle, badly hit, offered no trick, nor no resistance.

"Thought yuh was—in jail!" he rasped hoarsely.

"A lot of folks thought that," Ren retorted coldly. "Better talk fast, Jackpot. Sheriff Ostrand's climbing up here. Here he is now!"

"Coyle!" the officer exclaimed. "Yore hunch was straight, Ren. Like yore bullets! He shore come back to the spot!"

"What spot?" the wounded gambler bluffed.

"The spot where yuh plugged Ren's father, and figgered yuh'd killed him!" Ostrand growled. "Mebbe he would've died, too, if his old pard Perry Hamilton hadn't come along in time to hear him groanin'."

"Lon Taylor—ain't—dead?" Coyle gulped.

"Nope," Ren replied, with a wink at Sheriff Ostrand. "He's up at the

(Concluded on page 129)

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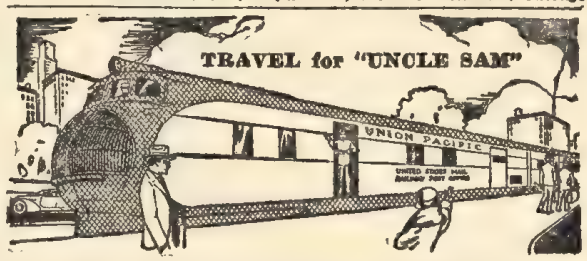

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MARTHA BEASLEY

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THE HITCHING RAIL

(Concluded from page 121)

be extradited. Doc settled, finally, in Denver, an' 'most drank hisself tuh death, dyin' in less'n a year, in a hospital. A whole book could be writ 'bout Doc Holliday, son, but I cain't take up no more space this time. Luck, Charlie. I'd shore like seein' Miami onct. In a gay place like that, how come yo're curious 'bout th' Doc an' his day?

Well, folks, bet yuh shore likes th' swell stories in this number. Hard tuh beat, ary one uv 'em. An' that feature story, BIG BEND BUCKAROOS, by WILTON WEST, oughta make yuh be spurrin' yore chair like it war a wild-pitchin' bronc from th' hill country. An' better keep watchin' fer th' next number, too, fer yo're gonna git RANGER BULLETS, by A. Leslie—a grand yarn of Arizona gunsmoke, an' also GOLDEN GUNS, by that ol' durned pen-slinger, Tom J. Hopkins, an' a full corral o' others what shore savvies their guns an' th' out-trails. Includin' Grant Taylor, Jackson Cole and W. D. Hoffman.

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TRIGGER TRAPPED

(Concluded from page 127)

K-Bar ranch. You see, Mr. Coyle, that was all a sham battle old Perry and me put on today in the saloon. The sheriff was in on it, too. And that's why I sprung that one about Dad packin' the thousand dollars on him. I knew yuh'd looked for it the day you ambushed him, but didn't find it."

"Hardly!" Ostrand put in. "Lon turned that money over to me for safe keepin', figgerin' it was just possible somebody might try trailin' him home—which they did."

"And that fake bill of sale yuh showed me tonight made things even worse for you, Coyle," Ren put in. "Too bad—for you—that yuh thought yuh'd overlooked that thousand dollars yuh figgered Dad was packin'. And come back here tonight, expectin' to find him where yuh'd left him all shot up."

"PURTY smart, ain't yuh?" the gambler sneered. "There wasn't no call for yuh to shoot me all up this way, though."

"No?" Ren retorted. "But it was all right when yuh started shootin' at *me!* Well, I'm kinda glad yuh did, you murderin' skunk. It give me a chance to kinda square things up for Dad. That dose of lead medicine yuh got ought to make him feel a lot better, and help tuh get him on his feet again just that much quicker."

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

(See page 69)

1. No.
2. Oklahoma is a Choctaw tribal Indian name—meaning "red people."
3. 1881.
4. Virgil, Wyatt and Morgan. Virgil was the famous marshal.
5. Death Valley, California.

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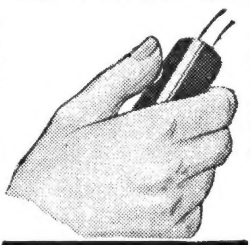

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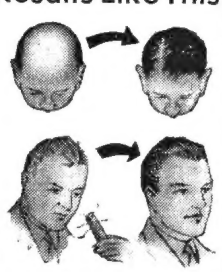

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